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THE WATERS OF CHASTISEMENT

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THE WATERS OF CHASTISEMENT

BY

MAJOR S. E. G. PONDER

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Note—

The Rajah of Bogra is a fictitious character. Any chance resemblance to past or present persons is entirely unintentional.

He who wallows in the Mire of Iniquity
shall be
purged with the Waters of Chastisement

CONTENTS

PART ONE

PAGE

THE MAN 9

PART TWO

THE WOMAN 109

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN THE STORY

Clive Penn	A rusticated university man
Muriel Burdon	A young woman of strong personality
Mr. A. Penn	Clive's father
Colonel Herbert	British Resident in Maddashah
Rajah of Bogra	An old-fashioned prince of evil reputation
Rugbar Chand	A cultured young Indian
Shahmeeran	A very powerful courtesan
Major Willis	British Resident in Bogra State
Paperta	An Indian widow
Hassain Ali	An Afghan trader. A tool of Shahmeeran

PART I

THE MAN

CHAPTER I

THE village of Strattonfield was drowsy in the scented warmth of a late summer afternoon. Tucked away in the folds of the country not far from Maidstone, its one road meandered past rows of cottages until it turned sharply first right and then left by the entrance to the vicarage, shortly afterwards becoming lost in a maze of country lanes.

There being no lord of the manor in or near Strattonfield, what social life there was in the village centred round the gaunt, rambling vicarage, hidden from the road by high elms and smaller gloomier trees, but set in a large, pleasant garden.

In the vicarage, tea was finished. The Reverend Aloysius Penn, a tall, lean man whose clothes seemed to hang on him, had gone to the disused stables to feed his numerous rabbits, bred for their pelts. A kindly but colourless man, in whom ambition had long been dead, he murmured to himself as he dealt out handfuls of grass-cuttings, pushing the food into the hutches. He was mildly annoyed because during the recent meal in the dreary morning room, littered with oddments, including a sewing machine, untidy baskets, and many letters and papers dealing with church matters, his wife had laid down the law in regard to the vexed question of the aged Mrs. Rubens. Angela Penn, the daughter of a well known judge should never have married a clergyman. A wisp of a woman with unruly hair, dark eyes sparkling with vitality, she had an energy which was a never failing source of astonishment to her easy-going husband. She felt strongly on the subject of their sharp-tongued, rebellious parishioner. Mrs. Rubens rarely came to church but was always loud-voiced with complaints at the village socials, and she now was asking to be recommended for extra comforts in her old age. The vicar was willing she should have them, but his wife had different views and did not hesitate to try to get her own way.

"Why shouldn't she have her coal and stuff, poor old thing," grumbled Mr. Penn to himself as he put down the now empty gardening basket.

He had turned away to get some drinking water when he heard his wife calling to him from somewhere on the far side of the house. Dusting his hands he hesitated, then wandered out on to the drive and so on to the side lawn where he saw his wife hurrying towards him.

"What is it now?" he enquired, running a hand over his scanty hair.

"Clive has just rung up," announced his wife excitedly.

"And what did he want?"

"He said he was coming home and would arrive some time this evening."

"Well, there's nothing to get excited about in that, is there?" replied the vicar quickly and petulantly. "Is that all you called me for? I was busy."

Mrs. Penn compressed her lips.

"If only you would let me finish what I was saying, I'd tell you. He said he has been 'sent down'."

"What!" cried her husband, startled. "Sent down! Nonsense. He must have been joking."

"Oh no he wasn't. Naturally I asked him why, but he said he would tell us tonight." Mrs. Penn paused dramatically. "It must be for something bad because he told me on no account to say anything to Muriel as he was going to tell her himself."

"Good gracious me, what on earth can he have been up to?" gasped Mr. Penn, dragging out a large handkerchief and wiping his face. "Did he say how long he had been sent down for?"

"No. He was very abrupt, and when I asked for details he just rang off." Mrs. Penn showed signs of tears. "Such a disgrace for us all."

Her husband pulled himself together and spoke reassuringly.

"To be sent down from the 'varsity isn't as bad as all that. Fellows get sent down for all sorts of things; not passing their exams. and that kind of thing. I was once nearly rusticated myself."

Turning on to the side path they walked up and down, Mrs. Penn doing most of the talking and taking the blackest view of the news, while her husband, when he could get in a few words, insisting they must not jump to conclusions, but wait until their son arrived and explained.

They had traversed the path several times when from the open side door of the house came the raucous sound of a telephone bell, causing Angela Penn to depart in haste to answer it. Her husband was about to take this opportunity to return to his rabbits when he glanced up and saw Muriel Burdon coming towards him. Muriel Burdon was slim and fair, with steady grey eyes, an aristocratic nose and a slow, deliberate manner. She lived with her widowed mother in a pleasant, half-timbered house at the end of the village and was a constant visitor to the vicarage. She and Clive Penn had grown up together and it had become an accepted fact that one day they would be officially engaged.

"Hullo, Mr. Penn, hasn't it been a glorious day?" she said pleasantly. "I came round to——" She paused uncertainly as she realised the vicar was looking upset and anxious. "What's the matter? You look worried. Not your precious rabbits, I hope?"

"No, it's nothing, nothing at all," replied Mr. Penn hastily. "Clive has just rung up to say that he is coming home this evening."

"Oh, is he? Won't that be nice for you?" Muriel Burdon's voice showed some animation. "Weren't you surprised because generally he only comes at week-ends, and today's only Wednesday?"

"Yes, it is unusual," answered the vicar, wishing his wife would return and save him from what might become an embarrassing situation. "But I expect he will tell us about it this evening."

The girl nodded and reverted to what she had been about to say earlier. It appeared that her mother, owing to a vague illness, would be unable to preside over the Women's Institute meeting on the following day. At this point Mrs. Penn returned, and after the matter had been explained, it was discussed, and ended with her sighing and saying that at such short notice she supposed she would have to preside herself.

Clive's return was then mentioned by the girl, but his mother firmly turned the subject aside, and in due course Muriel Burdon went away leaving the vicar and his wife to spend an unhappy, restless evening.

In a golden dusk Clive Penn sat crouched over the large steering wheel of his sports car, which he was driving down from Oxford with a reckless abandon. His mood was one of indifference curiously mixed with a deep seated anger against the world in

general. His clear-cut features and deep-set, grey-green eyes gave him a faintly hawk-like appearance, and this was accentuated as he stared fixedly ahead over the long red bonnet of the car. Now and again he clenched his teeth, and his knuckles whitened as he tightened his grip on the wheel.

What was he going to say to his parents? This problem had been nagging at him for several hours. His father would understand and be easy to handle, but his mother was a different matter. She would keep at him until she had dragged out the last, least detail of the unfortunate affair which had led to his being sent down. There would be recriminations and possibly tears. Yes, he must break away as soon as he could and go off and see Muriel. Those steady eyes of hers would look at him and he would wriggle, but she would understand. Anyway what did it matter if she did not! He had been rusticated for good, and that was all there was to it.

It was half past nine when he swung the car off the main road and into a side turning leading to Strattonfield. Still driving recklessly he crossed a narrow bridge, turned right and within a few minutes was honking his way up the village street. He drew up in front of the vicarage with screeching brakes and gravel flying from under the rear wheels. Getting out of the car he slammed the door and went into the cool, bare hall where he glanced into the morning-room before continuing to the drawing-room which faced the rose garden at the back of the house. The door was half open and with hands deep in the pockets of his grey flannel trousers, he strolled into the room with an affected air of indifference. His mother was seated on a chesterfield with her feet up trying to read a book, while his father was standing by the open glass doors, staring out into the garden. Mrs. Penn laid down her book and glanced up, her husband turned slowly, and both parents stared for a moment in silence at their son, who paused on the threshold.

"Hullo, mum," he said, grinning faintly as he went across and pecked at his mother's cool cheek. Straightening himself he looked across at his father. "Hullo, dad. Here I am. Bit surprised weren't you when you heard I was coming back tonight?"

"Yes, we were." Mr. Penn fingered his chin and hesitated. "Well, what is all this about your being sent down? What happened?"

"Yes, and why didn't you tell me something more about it when you rang up?" cried Mrs. Penn, discarding the book and

getting to her feet. "You've worried us very much indeed. Now tell me all about it."

"Well, there isn't much really, mum. It was like this." Clive had moved towards a small table on which there were many knick-knacks, and glancing down he aimlessly fingered them as he spoke. "On Monday night a fellow in another college threw a party and I and several other fellows went round to his rooms to celebrate because he'd been left a good deal of money. It was late when we started back and we were also a bit lit up, you know. On the way across the quad we ran into a proctor, and there was rather a rumpus." Clive paused and both his parents waited anxiously for him to continue.

"What do you mean, rumpus?" enquired Mrs. Penn sharply.

"Well, the proctor said we were making nuisances of ourselves. I admit we were singing and joking. And then, as bad luck would have it, the Dean came out of his house, and hearing the argument, came across. I don't know why he should pick on me, I'm sure, and I lost my temper and told him a few home truths."

"Goodness me, I hope you weren't very rude," exclaimed Mr. Penn alarmed.

"I'm afraid I was rather, dad."

"What did you say to him?" demanded his mother.

"I can't remember exactly, but the other fellows said I wasn't polite."

"Well, what happened then?" demanded Mrs. Penn, twisting her fingers together.

"Oh, the other men dragged me away and that's all there was to it. Next morning the Dean sent for me and told me I was to be sent down."

"For how long?" asked his father, turning and looking out into the garden.

"For good, I'm afraid, dad."

There followed a pregnant silence until Mrs. Penn spoke again.

"But surely they wouldn't have sent you down just for that? There must have been something else as well. What was it?"

"I tell you there wasn't, mum. And there's nothing that can be done about it."

"Oh yes there is." Mrs. Penn turned sharply towards her husband. "You write to the Dean and see if you can't smooth things over."

"No, for goodness sake don't do that," cried Clive starting forward. "It wouldn't do any good at all and might make things worse."

"I don't see why it should." Mrs. Penn gave her son a searching look. "I believe you've only told us part of what happened. You must have behaved disgracefully. Getting intoxicated is bad enough." She turned again to her husband. "Do they send men down merely for getting drunk?"

"No, my dear, not unless there are other things as well," replied Mr. Penn. "Clive has told us he probably insulted the Dean, and I agree with him that writing would not help at all. He has been rusticated and we must face the fact, unpleasant as it is."

"Yes, but it's all so vague and unsatisfactory." Mrs. Penn searched for a handkerchief and broke into tears as she sat down again.

"I'm frightfully sorry, mum, really I am. But it was just bad luck meeting the proctor like that, and then the Dean coming on the scene. Ordinarily we'd have gone back to our rooms and everything would have been all right. You can't very well blame me for having a bit of bad luck."

Mrs. Penn continued to weep noisily and the vicar stared gloomily out at the roses, while their son decided it was time to break away from the awkward scene. He turned towards the door.

"I must dash off now," he announced diffidently. "I want a word with Muriel. I won't be long. I'll get my things out of the car and then pop round and see her."

Fifteen minutes later he parked his car at the side of the road facing the short drive leading up to the Burdon's house. As he hurried up the drive he saw a light in the living-room on the right of the porch. Striding in through the open door, he went into the room unannounced where he found Muriel Burdon and her mother playing patience at a small table beside the window.

"Good evening, Mrs. Burdon. Hullo Mogs," he said with forced cheerfulness.

Mrs. Burdon took off her glasses, looked up, and smiled wanly.

"Good evening, Clive. This is rather a surprise, isn't it? We had no idea you were coming home."

"Yes, it is rather. I only got back a short time ago."

Muriel Burdon pushed back her chair and got to her feet.

"I knew you were coming, Clive. I was round at the vicarage earlier this evening and your father told me."

"Oh, did he?" Clive's voice showed some anxiety. "Did he give any reason?"

"No, he just said you had rung up and would be arriving tonight."

Clive sighed with relief and turned to Mrs. Burdon.

"I say Mrs. Burdon, I hope you'll excuse us, but I want to have a word with Muriel. Do you mind if we go out into the garden?"

"No, of course not. You run along. I am not feeling well. I think I'll go to bed," replied Mrs. Burdon gathering up the cards.

"Thanks awfully, Mrs. Burdon." Clive caught Muriel by the arm. "Come on Mogs. Let's go out."

They went out on to the drive where they turned left and then to the back of the house, where there was a small lawn edged with flower beds. The girl said nothing, but glanced once or twice at her companion as they crossed the grass.

"You're looking very serious, Clive," she stated at last as they sat down on a swinging garden seat. "What's the matter? Nothing gone wrong, I hope?"

He nodded glumly and stared down at his shoes.

"I'm afraid there is, Mogs. I've got some bad news for you." He paused.

"Yes, go on. What is it?"

"Well, to cut a long story short, I've been rusticated."

"Oh, Clive. You haven't. How long for?"

"For good, I'm afraid."

The girl gave a cry of distress and then laid a cool hand on that of her companion. He took it and squeezed it as he continued to stare down at his feet.

"Tell me about it. Perhaps it isn't as bad as you think, Clive. What did your parents say?"

"Not much. I didn't give 'em the chance, but broke away almost as soon as I got back. I had to come and see you, Mogs. I knew you'd understand." He pressed her hand again. "I feel foul about it all."

"Yes, of course you do. How did it happen?"

"There isn't much to tell, really. You see on Monday night Bill Blacky gave a bit of a party in his rooms. He's a damned nice fellow and I and several other chaps went round and got rather lit up. And, well, you know how it is."

Muriel nodded understandingly.

"I admit we were a bit noisy, singing and all that. On our way back across the quad to our rooms we ran into a proctor. He stopped us and said we were making nuisances of ourselves. Then he picked on me. I dunno why." Clive paused, felt for his case, and taking out a cigarette lit it with a slightly shaking hand. "There was a bit of an argument, of course, and, as bad luck would have it, just then the Dean must pop out of his door and come across to see what was happening. He also picked on me and said I was a pest, or something of that sort. I started to tell him where he got off when the proctor caught me by the arm and in shaking him off I must have bumped into the Dean because his glasses fell off and somebody trod on 'em." Clive grinned faintly. "Then there was the deuce to pay because the old man was as wild as anything and said I'd done it on purpose, which I hadn't. Anyway I lost my temper."

"Oh, Clive, I suppose you were very rude," cried the girl as her companion paused.

"I must have been."

"What happened then?"

"Oh, the other fellows dragged me away and the next morning I was sent for and told I'd been sent down for good."

"What awfully bad luck, Clive. You must have been upset about it." Muriel stared at his gloomy profile and pressed his arm sympathetically.

"Thanks, Mogs. I knew you'd understand and not try and tell me I've been an ass. As a matter of fact it wasn't exactly all bad luck you know."

"What do you mean?"

He wriggled uncomfortably and threw away his half-smoked cigarette.

"I'm not a bad sort of chap, am I, Mogs?"

"Don't be silly. You're a dear," said the girl quickly.

"You and I have been pals ever since I can remember, haven't we? And you know me pretty well, but there is one thing you don't know about me, because I only found it out myself not long ago."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Well it's, it's—" He hesitated and struggled to find the right words to make his confession. "You see, Mogs, after I've had a good deal to drink I don't seem to behave like the other fellows. I don't know why. They get more and more jolly, and sing, and rag about, but I suddenly get depressed and quarrelsome." He paused and shot a quick glance at the girl,

who nodded encouragingly. "It was not long after I first went up to Oxford I found this out. A party of us went into a local pub, and we'd drunk a good deal of beer when Peter Holder, who was in the crowd, said something I didn't like and I hit him. I just couldn't help myself. Of course it caused a bit of a scene and afterwards I was ruddy sorry."

"You're quite sure you didn't hit the Dean, Clive?" asked Muriel anxiously.

"Yes, quite sure. I wasn't as tight as all that." He turned and grinned again. "But judging from what the other fellows told me the next day I seem to have used some pretty choice language to the old man."

A long pause followed with the girl considering what was the best thing to say.

"It's all most unfortunate," she murmured at last. "If you get like that, Clive, you shouldn't drink so much, you know."

He nodded.

"Yes, I know. I did lay off it for quite a while, but now and again you get lit up before you realise what's happening, like I did this time."

"Yes, I suppose it does happen. What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I haven't really thought about it. Get a job of some sort, I suppose. I can't go in for politics without a degree."

"Yes, but what kind of job?"

"A land agent or something like that. Dad knows lots of fellows with estates, and he should be able to fix up something."

"Why not try for the army or the navy, Clive?" Muriel turned and smiled. "You'd make a splendid N.O."

"No, that's out of the question, Mogs. I'm much too old."

"Nonsense, you are only just twenty."

"But too old all the same." Now that he had unburdened himself, Clive was feeling better and his normal cheerfulness was returning. "I'll tell you something, Mogs. It's a secret and I've kept it even from you. I have always longed to travel. Not to Paris or Berlin, but out to Egypt, and India and China, and places like that." He paused and lighted another cigarette. "It is rather strange you know, but dad has encouraged it in his mild way and tried me to get me to read travel books. I can't think why, because he has never travelled himself and certainly hasn't got the cash to send me half round the world."

"Didn't you have an uncle who travelled a great deal and died when you were young, Clive?" enquired Muriel, watching a pair of bats swooping down over the lawn.

"You mean Uncle Ralph. Yes, he certainly spent all his time running about, but, of course, I don't remember him very well because he only came down here occasionally."

"Well, there you are. I expect your father wanted to do the same, and that's why he talked travel to you."

Clive nodded and then changed the subject. They turned to personal matters and discussed the local news until the girl suddenly got to her feet.

"I must go in, Clive. It's getting awfully late," she said moving across the grass. "Mother isn't very well and I must heat up some milk for her. Ring me up in the morning and don't worry. I am quite sure everything will be all right."

When Clive arrived back at the vicarage he found his parents had not gone to bed. They were in the morning-room where the Vicar was listening to a foreign broadcast of music, and Mrs. Penn was doing some sewing. She looked up as her son came into the room and there was a pinched, aggrieved look on her face.

"You've been a long time, Clive," she announced, putting down her work. "I must say I don't think it was very nice of you to rush off like that as soon as you arrived. We have been waiting up for you. Have you had anything to eat?"

"Yes thanks, mum. I stopped and had a bite on the way down."

Mrs. Penn glanced across at her husband, who switched off the wireless as Clive half seated himself on the edge of the heavy central table where he lit another cigarette. He glanced at his parents and wondered what was coming. There was a distinct air of tension in the room.

"I am going to bed," said Mrs. Penn, sighing as she put away the sewing. "If you want anything to eat there is some cold ham in the dining-room, Clive." She left the room with a good-night that was the essence of long suffering fortitude.

Mr. Penn was embarrassed and nervous. He hated scenes and had been forced to listen for most of the evening to his wife's condemnation of their son's casual behaviour. She had also insisted he should speak to Clive severely, which he considered as futile as it was unnecessary. Getting up from his chair he crossed the room, and putting a hand on his son's shoulder, cleared his throat. Clive turned his head and grinned.

"I understand, dad. Mum's been getting at you," he said lightly. "Of course I shouldn't have gone off like that, but I

felt I must talk to Muriel about it all. I knew she would understand. She did and I feel pounds better for it."

Having been forestalled Mr. Penn was at a loss for words and to fill in the time he searched for his pipe, filled it and hunted for a box of matches. He then lit the pipe and sat down in a battered armchair half facing his son. Clive watched him and wondered what was to be said. Was the old man going to lecture him ? If so he would have to listen patiently and bear it gracefully.

For a few minutes father and son covertly watched each other in silence. Suddenly the elder man took the pipe from his mouth and stared down into the glowing ash in the bowl.

"You know son, the older you've grown the more I have come to realise how unlike either your mother or myself you are," he began almost apologetically. "For one thing you look just as your Uncle Ralph did at your age."

"Do I, dad ?" Clive was startled at this unexpected opening.

"Yes you do, most certainly. I have never spoken very much to you about him and I don't suppose you remember him clearly. He died when you were four, and only came here on rare occasions."

"Oh yes, I remember him all right, dad. He gave me half a sovereign just before he went off for the last time. Mum took it away from me and I cried for hours."

"Yes, so he did. Just like him to give a sum like that to a child. That was when he went off to the Far East where he lost his life. He was stabbed in some brawl up in Harbin."

"What ?" Clive was so startled that he slipped off the table and faced his father. "How awful. How did it happen ?"

"We never got the full details, but I think I know what the trouble was. He got rather excitable when he had drunk a good deal." The vicar paused and glanced up at his son. "It seems you resemble him more closely than I thought. He lost his life and now you have lost a fine chance in life."

Clive nodded gloomily and half turned away. All his depression returned with renewed force.

"Well, I'm not going to lecture you, son, but instead I am going to tell you things which will startle you, and which I had not meant to tackle until you came down with a degree. You have forced my hand." Mr. Penn paused and relighted his pipe. When it was again in full blast he looked up and his faded eyes twinkled. "What I am going to talk about concerns your Uncle Ralph, because he may have decided your future."

"Good Lord, what's he got to do with my future?" cried Clive, puzzled and a little excited.

"Listen and I will tell you as briefly as I can. Your Uncle Ralph and I were at school together for a short time, and for brothers we got on pretty well. He was your grandmother's favourite, and being the eldest got the lion's share when she died. As soon as he collected it he promptly left Oxford and did what he had always wanted to do. He travelled, and how I envied him." Mr. Penn paused and sighed before continuing. "He would go off for years at a time and I would not hear a word from him, and then he'd turn up here and say casually he had been gold mining in New Guinea, or shooting ibex in India.

"He used to sit on the edge of that table just as you are doing now, but he smoked vile cheroots instead of cigarettes. Your mother said it took days to clear out the smell." The vicar's tone became reflective. "He was a strange fellow in many ways. He rarely said anything about himself that mattered, and although he didn't avoid women, he was what I would call a natural bachelor. He always wanted a son, though, and he thought the world of you."

"Did he?" Clive went back to his perch on the edge of the table and swung a leg to and fro in a manner that always irritated his mother. "I do remember he used to take me on his knee and tell me about lions, and wolves, and big ships. And now I come to think of it he did say once that he wished my first name was Ralph instead of it being my second one."

His father nodded and sucked his pipe almost viciously.

"Yes, we had quite a misunderstanding over that, but your mother insisted on your first name being Clive."

"Why, dad?"

Mr. Penn hesitated and then shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"If you must know, before your mother married me she was in love with a man of that name, but he died."

"Oh!" Clive made a grimace. "Go on, tell me some more about Uncle Ralph, dad."

"Well, before he went off for the last time, he was down here for several days and late one autumn evening, the night before he left, he said he wanted a quiet talk with me. We walked up and down the lawn in the twilight and he seemed unusually depressed. Long afterwards it occurred to me that he knew he would never come back. He started off by saying he thought I was lucky to have a peaceful, contented kind of existence instead of being a restless soul as he was. I said I envied him,

and he changed the subject by asking what I had mapped out as a future for you. I laughed and said there was plenty of time to consider that, but he became rather excited, and after a lot of talk about education, insisted that, because he would never marry, he would be responsible for your education. I laughed at him again and said I was sure some seductive widow would carry him off one day. But he wasn't amused and called me a double-dyed fool. He then dragged out a long envelope, heavily sealed, and gave it to me. I saw it was addressed to you. Naturally I wanted to know what it was all about, but he abruptly ordered me to give it to you when you came down from Oxford and not before, and on no account was I to mention its existence to anyone."

Mr. Penn knocked out the ash from his pipe, stirred in the chair, and looked up at his son's animated face.

"Well, as I told you, he died in some den up in Harbin, and when the solicitors sent for me I found he had left everything he had to you, but in the form of a trust." The vicar smiled askew. "Your mother was rather aggrieved and seemed to think it should have come to me. Anyway, the interest in question was to be spent on your education, and now that has come to an abrupt end, I suppose the time has arrived for me to give you the letter."

"Where is it?" demanded Clive, slipping off his perch.

Without speaking his father heaved himself out of his chair and going across the room lifted up a small, heavy deed box from beneath a side table. He brought it to the central table, and producing a key, opened it. From somewhere near the bottom, under a mass of papers and documents, he pulled out a buff-coloured envelope addressed in a bold, flowing hand. Glancing up and handing it to his son, who was leaning over him, Mr. Penn watched him break the seals with trembling hands. Clive then ripped open the envelope, and pulling out two sheets of foolscap, spread them on the table. Both father and son bent over and read the contents.

Strattonfield Vicarage,
14th October, 1913.

My dear Clive,

This is going to be a difficult letter to write because there is so much I want to say and I don't know how to say it. I may be a little abrupt because I am not good at letter writing and like to get to the point as soon as I can.

When you open this you will have left Oxford, where I hope you did well; at least you should have enjoyed yourself. Whether you learned what you set out to do is not so important as the friends and contacts you made. Had I lived I could have helped you there.

You were a great little chap when I gave this letter to your father, and I did it because I knew my time was drawing near; how I knew does not matter, but in the Orient there are men who have uncanny powers of being able to peep into the future.

I should have liked to have had a son of my own, but you made a good substitute and I wish I could have seen more of you, but I was a restless soul. Because I want you to become a fellow who is broad-minded, and above all, tolerant, I have made certain arrangements. All I have has been left to you. It will not be as much as I should have liked it to have been, but it will be enough. The arrangements I have made, will, I am sure, meet with your approval because you would be a strange fellow if you did not long to go down to the sea in great ships.

I have always been a firm believer in travel, real travel that is, not just going from one sight to the next, but mixing with the people and trying to get to know how they live and think. It is not easy, but it is certainly worth attempting. Now here is what I want you to do and you must not mind if I seem a bit dictatorial. I have given the subject a lot of thought, and I am not talking through my hat.

As soon as you have read this letter show it to your father and then go off with him to the family solicitors. Show the head of the firm this and it will authorise him to carry out the instructions he has in his office. These will explain that I wish you to go out to India and spend at least six months in the country. India is one of the most wonderful of all countries if only you can manage to get a little below the surface of things. See the sights of course, but also try and get to know something of the peasants and the country-folks. Meet some of the princes too, if you can, but don't bother about the Indians in the towns and cities because they are not typical and need not be bothered with. And don't you ever forget, my lad, that Indians, Chinese, and such-like, are grand chaps when you get to know them, and they are remarkably like yourself in many ways. An Indian coolie has his life to lead, with hopes and fears, desires and passions, good and bad points, just as you have, so think of this, and if you do you will get along famously. Be friendly to all men but intimate with few. I shall have to break off because this is developing into a tract.

I have read through what I have written and it seems vague and unsatisfactory, but it is the best I can do myself; all the details have been worked out by Stuart, the solicitor.

I expect by now you will be wondering why I picked upon India for you to visit. There are several reasons. Because I am fond of it, because it will introduce you to the East as it really is, and, finally, I am firmly convinced that in the future we are going to have trouble out there, and you, having lived in the country, at least will be able to speak with some first-hand knowledge.

Before I break off I want to give you a couple of useful tips which are worth remembering. Don't ever be afraid of being enthusiastic, older people won't smile, they will envy you. Secondly, watch your drinks. Hosts of fellows out East have been ruined by striving to be known as good fellows. Stand your round, but that is all that is needed, and don't be frightened of saying no when you have had your quota. If you can't be jolly and friendly without soaking yourself in drink, then you must be in a pretty bad way.

When you arrive at Bombay I should not be surprised if the son of my old bearer turned up to meet you. That may sound queer, but it is just one of the intriguing mysteries of India.

Give my salaams to your father and all the best of good luck to yourself.

Your affectionate uncle,
R. B. S. Penn.

P.S. My bearer's name was Mahommed Khan.

R.B.S.P.

Mr. Penn finished the letter, straightened himself and chuckled.

"Good old Ralph. Just like him to do a thing of this sort," he declared, staring down at his son's flushed, excited face. "How does it strike you, Clive?"

"I can hardly believe it, dad." Clive pushed away the letter and started to stride up and down the room in considerable excitement. "It's one of those things that don't seem real, and take a while to sink in. Think of it dad. I'm really going to travel. Right out to India. Gosh, it's marvellous. I shan't sleep a wink tonight. Let's go up and see the solicitors as soon as we can."

Mr. Penn fingered his chin and thought for a few moments.

"Yes, we can go tomorrow if you like. You can run me up in the morning, and we can be back here in time for tea."

CHAPTER II

THE next day Clive and his father drove up to London where they had a long interview with the family solicitor. After luncheon they returned to Strattonfield and Clive, dropping his father at the vicarage, went off to see Muriel Burdon, with whom he had held a long telephone conversation before starting off that morning. He found her snipping off dead roses on the edge of the lawn at the back of the house. Hearing him coming, she turned and greeted him gravely.

"Hullo, Clive. I've been waiting impatiently all the afternoon." She pulled off her gardening gloves and moved towards the swinging seat. "Come along and tell me about it. It all sounded rather like a fairy story over the telephone this morning."

"Yes, it did, Mogs. It's too wonderful for words," he cried taking her arm. "On the way back I've been bursting to tell you about it."

"I expect you have, and I am as excited as you are."

"Are you really? You don't show it." Clive grinned as they sat down. "But you always were calm and collected, Mogs. That's what I like about you."

The girl smiled and laid a hand on her companion's knee as he lit a cigarette.

"What happened? Are you really off to India," she asked.

"Of course I am," he replied swinging the seat in his excitement. "It's all fixed up. As I told you this morning, dad and I dashed up and had a long pow-wow with the solicitor. Gosh, he was a dried-up old stick. Kept telling me to keep calm when I wanted to ask him questions. He read Uncle Ralph's letter to me and produced lots of papers and read them out just as if they didn't mean anything at all. Uncle Ralph you know, left me everything he had, but all the cash is tied up in a kind of trust and only the interest can be used. It paid for my education and that was why I was given such a grand allowance up at Oxford. At the time I thought it jolly decent of dad to have forked out like that, but it was my uncle all the time, and dad had to keep his mouth shut about it. It seems there is now about four thousand pounds available, and it is to be spent on my travelling and seeing the world. You see, Mogs, Uncle Ralph didn't only want me to see India, but China and lots of other places as well."

Muriel sighed and clasped her hands as her companion paused.

"How I envy you, Clive," she said. "Here have I got to stay in dull old Strattonfield while you gallivant up and down the world."

He turned and catching one of her hands squeezed it.

"Wouldn't it be grand if you could have come too, Mogs?" he exclaimed. "But you couldn't you know, because I've got to go alone and everything would have been washed out if I had been married. He had some quaint ideas did my uncle, and he's drawn up pages of instructions."

Clive went on to explain that he had to travel by first class P. and O. to Bombay and from there visit a long list of places up-country. He also told his companion of his uncle's instructions as to how he should behave, and what he must, and must not, do in India.

"He seems to have thought of everything," exclaimed Muriel as he broke off to light another cigarette. "I think it's rather a shame to tie you up like that, but I suppose you could disregard his instructions if you wanted to."

"I shan't mind. All that matters is that I'm going out there. I expect he has done it because he was a bit of a lad himself and didn't want me to get into unnecessary trouble."

The girl nodded and there was silence for a few moments.

"When are you sailing?" she enquired at last.

"As soon as I can."

"Won't you find it rather strange going out to a country where you don't know anybody?"

"No, of course I shan't." Clive laughed and shook his head. "I expect I shall meet lots of people on the ship, and you soon make acquaintances in hotels and trains."

Muriel shrugged her shoulders and got to her feet.

"Well Clive, if you get into any mischief out there I shall come out and drag you home by one of your ears."

"I believe you would." He also got up from the seat.

"Certainly I would. I have money of my own, even if it isn't four thousand pounds."

"But I shan't get into any scrapes."

"You might. If you can get into one at Oxford you can do the same in India, and far more easily, I should think."

They began to walk up and down the lawn and the girl abruptly changed the subject as they discussed the difficult business of packing, buying suitable clothes, and problems of that kind. When the time arrived for Clive to return home

for dinner, Muriel accompanied him to the road where the car was waiting.

"Somehow I wish you weren't going," she said wistfully, as she rested a hand on the side of the car.

"You'll miss me?" Clive turned his head and grinned.

"Yes, of course I shall, but it isn't that altogether."

"Then what is it?"

"Oh, I don't know, Clive. I just wish you weren't." The girl tapped herself. "I can't explain. It's something inside me here which makes me feel I've done something awful and am just about to be found out." She turned hastily and ran back to the house leaving him to shrug his shoulders and push in the gear.

* * *

It was five weeks later when Clive turned from the rails of the s.s. *Poona* as she sidled from her berth in Tilbury Docks. Nearing the stern of the ship he halted and again waved to the little group of people standing on the quayside. His parents and Muriel had come to see him off. They had arisen at 5 a.m. that morning and after a chilly journey up to London in the company of milk churns and workmen had arrived at the docks to discover there were two hours to wait until the ship sailed.

This period became an exhausting business for Clive. After inspecting his cabin the party had trailed round the public rooms of the ship, ending up in the dining saloon, where they had breakfast. Conversation, from lack of fresh material, soon became forced and consisted mainly of Mrs. Penn's repeated warnings to her son not to forget any of her advice. He must write regularly, guard his belongings, and always take two aspirins and go to bed at once if he felt unwell in India, which everyone knew was a land reeking with strange and fearful germs. He must also watch for snakes, robbers, and predatory females, dubbed 'those women.'

"For goodness sake leave the fellow alone, Angela," her husband had cried in exasperation. "He isn't a child and is quite capable of looking after himself."

Mrs. Penn had replied sharply, and Muriel, catching the vicar's eye, suggested they might return to the deck.

Relief for Clive came at last when visitors were shooed ashore, the gangway let down, and hawsers cast off. As the great ship slid out into the main stream he sighed and shook off the temporary depression caused by the parting. He was now free,

completely free. The world lay open to him, a gaping treasure chest. He was going to have a grand time and enjoy every moment.

"Going far?" suddenly enquired a voice by his side.

Turning his head sharply he saw a middle-aged man smoking a well-blackened pipe as he leaned on the rails. The man's appearance, with his iron-grey hair, strong, tanned face, close-clipped moustache and blue eyes, was distinguished and pleasing.

"Yes, out to India, sir," he replied.

"That's good. India is a grand country," observed the stranger smiling. "Joining a regiment?"

"No, I'm not in the army. I am just going out on a visit."

The man removed the pipe from his mouth and knocked out some ash before speaking again.

"On a pleasure trip, eh? Lucky fellow. My name's Herbert, Colonel Herbert. I'm in the Political Service."

"Oh yes, sir." Clive nodded although he had no idea what the Political Service meant. "My name is Penn."

"Penn, you say." The colonel rubbed his chin reflectively. "That's curious you know. It has a familiar ring about it, but for the life of me I can't remember why. Where do you come from?"

"We live down in Kent, sir. My father is the vicar of Strattonfield near Maidstone. I have just come down from Oxford."

"Oh, I'm from Somerset and hardly know Kent at all, so it's not that."

Colonel Herbert now changed the subject and they discussed the coming voyage until he turned away.

"I must go and do some unpacking, I suppose. I'll see you later and we will have a talk on India."

"Thank you, sir. I'd like to."

Clive watched the colonel walk down the deck. This was a piece of luck. He now knew one person in the ship, and quite a decent fellow too. He also should do some unpacking.

Later in the morning, after struggling with suit cases in the small, two-berthed cabin, he gave up. Finding his way to the aft smoking room he ordered a beer and sat down at one of the many small tables. There were several men dotted about the room and he studied them. They were older than he was and obviously either army officers or officials. None of them was what he would have called prepossessing, and one or two even looked bad tempered and disgruntled.

He had finished his beer and was wondering whether to order another when Colonel Herbert appeared, saw him, and came across to the table.

"So you've found your way here have you, young fellow," he observed sitting down. "Have a drink with me? My wife is still unpacking so I have been shot out of the cabin as a nuisance." He ordered Clive another beer and a yellow gin for himself. "Settled in all right?"

"Fairly well, sir. It seems I am to have the cabin to myself until Marseilles. When the other fellow comes aboard there, it's going to be a bit of a squash, I'm afraid."

"You'll be all right if you are both reasonably tidy. Who is he?"

"I don't know, sir. The purser said his name was Christmas."

"Curious name. Never heard of him before." The colonel brought out his pipe and began to fill it. "Talking of names, I still can't recall why yours seems so familiar, but I shall. By the way, where are you sitting in the saloon?"

"At number sixty-six table, sir. The steward asked me where I wanted to sit and I said I didn't mind, so he put me there."

"Oh well, if you don't care for your companions you can always change your place this evening. I can't ask you to sit with us because we're at the captain's table."

Colonel Herbert now spoke of India and his work there. Clive learned he was the British Resident in the large and wealthy Central Indian state of Maddabad and that the Maharajah was a young man with extravagant tastes. The prince, a Hindu, had leanings towards European forms of sport and amusement, including tennis, bridge, and dancing.

"He is not too easy to handle," explained the colonel smiling. "It's rather like dealing with a young and frolicsome colt."

"I don't quite understand, sir?" said Clive with a puzzled frown. "Are you a kind of watch dog?"

"Yes and no. I am a go-between the ruler and the Government of India. My job is to keep a benevolent eye on things in general, and give advice, sometimes rather unpleasant advice, from the Maharajah's point of view." The colonel paused. "You see he dips rather heavily into the money bags, and that means heavy taxes and general distress among his people, so I have to put my foot down tactfully every now and again."

"Do you really, sir?" Clive leaned forward, surprised and deeply interested. "Doesn't he object?"

"Yes, but he can't do anything about it. He goes off and sulks in his palace, but it never lasts for long. He's a good fellow, even if he is too fond of luxurious motor cars, expensive polo ponies, and far more expensive young women. He was educated in England and I think that is bad in some ways. They seem to pick up many of our vices and few of our virtues. It's the Diwan, however, who is the really difficult fellow. He hates me like poison."

"Diwan, sir?"

"Yes, he's a sort of prime minister in the state. A cunning old devil if there ever was one."

"It sounds awfully interesting work, sir."

"Yes it is if you like that kind of thing. I don't have a bad time. The shooting is some of the best in the country. Do you do any?"

"No, sir. I haven't had much chance yet, but I'd like to."

At the moment luncheon gongs started to boom up and down the decks, and broke the thread of the conversation. When Clive reached his table in the dining saloon he found the other three occupants already seated. Turning his chair, he sat down murmuring a few words of greeting. On his right was a woman of uncertain age, whose aristocratic, faintly goat-like face was crowned by a mass of straw-coloured hair. On his left was a plump, jolly little woman, and opposite a slight, fair man, with a short, clipped beard and vague, blue eyes. To cover his slight nervousness Clive picked up the bill of fare and studied its lengthy selection of assorted foods. As he did so he was aware that his companions were attempting to sum him up. Putting down the card, he gave an order to the steward and caught the eye of the woman on his right.

"Hadn't we better introduce ourselves?" she suggested in a slightly booming voice. "My name is Lewis, Lady Constant Lewis. I am going out to Malta."

"Oh, are you? So are we," cried the plump woman. "Aren't we, George?" She glanced at the fair man. "We are Mr. and Mrs. O'Leary."

This information was received with a gracious nod from Lady Constant, who turned and looked at Clive.

"And you, young man. What is your name?" she enquired, waving away a dish offered by the steward.

"Clive Penn, and I'm on my way to Bombay."

"Oh, so I suppose you are in the army? I am going out to stay with my brother, a commander in the navy."

"No, I am merely visiting India," answered Clive, helping himself to grilled sole.

"Ah, then you must meet Colonel Herbert who is on board. He is quite a personage out there. Such a charming man."

"I have done so already, Lady Constant."

"Oh." The woman paused for a moment. "Don't you agree with me he is very nice?"

"Yes, I do."

"Have you met his wife yet?"

"No, but I expect he will introduce me later on."

Lady Constant nodded significantly and changing the subject left the remainder of the table wondering what she thought of Mrs. Herbert. The meal proceeded on the usual lines, with the elder woman doing most of the talking. Mrs. O'Leary watched and listened, and was impressed by the title and poise of the other woman. Her husband browsed contentedly over his food with thoughts clearly far away from his present surroundings.

In the late afternoon the ship was well on her way down the Channel and had started to pitch with increasing severity. Added to this discomfort there was also a tendency to roll. The combination of these movements was too much for Clive, who retired to his bunk where he remained in a state of acute misery until the ship passed Gibraltar. Colonel Herbert came once or twice to see him. He was sympathetic and offered advice on the mitigation of seasickness, but Clive was feeling too unwell to pay more than scant attention.

Once in the Mediterranean the *Poona* steadied down and Clive felt strong enough to stagger up on deck where he installed himself in a deck chair. The bright sunshine and strong breeze soon cheered him up and he ate a meal for the first time in many days. He was watching the sandy shores of Spain slip by, as they drove up towards Marseilles, when Mrs. O'Leary arrived and sat down in a chair beside him.

"I am so glad to see you up and about again, Mr. Penn," she said brightly. "We, my husband and I, have missed you in the saloon. Are you feeling better now?" She continued without waiting for a reply. "My husband and I never feel the slightest qualms, even in the worst weather. Do you know Malta? We adore it. We generally spend a few weeks there on our way to Palestine. My husband is an archæologist, you know. We have a dig near Gaza." Mrs. O'Leary's butterfly type of mind flitted to another subject. "Don't you think Lady Constant a little overpowering? We do." She then laughed and patted her

elaborately dressed hair. "How silly of me. Of course you wouldn't, because you haven't been in the saloon. I am longing to find out who she really is, but nobody seems to know. I can't think why she isn't sitting at the captain's table."

"Perhaps she doesn't like the captain," suggested Clive grinning.

"Do you think so?" The woman stared at her companion with wide eyes. "Anyway I asked Mrs. Herbert who she was, and she merely smiled in a superior sort of way and said she supposed she must be a peer's daughter, seeing she isn't married. I'm not a snob, of course, but really she does behave as if she were royalty."

Clive listened to the spate of chatter, smiling and nodding as occasion demanded.

"Such an odd lot of people on board," continued the woman. "No, I don't smoke," she declared, when offered a cigarette. "All the army wives keep together, and such cats some of them are. Their husbands seem to spend all their time drinking in the smoking saloon. I'm glad my husband and I are not going all the way to Bombay. Is this your first trip out to the East, Mr. Penn? It is, is it." She babbled on as Clive nodded. "Well, if the people in India are all anything like those I've seen in P. and O.'s going out there I'm glad I have kept away."

"But Colonel Herbert is very nice," observed Clive swiftly.

"Yes, he is an exception. But even he's got an abrupt manner. As for his wife!" She made a grimace. "Well, I am due to play deck tennis. So glad you are all right again. We've had such a nice chat."

She got up from her chair and departed, leaving Clive amused and a little bewildered.

After tea that day Colonel Herbert introduced his wife to Clive. A tall, angular woman, with a long-faded complexion, high-bridged nose, and grey, intelligent eyes, she impressed him as being a woman of the world who knew her own mind.

"Please do sit down," she said, leaning against the rails with her husband beside her. "I hear you are coming out to India on a visit. What made you choose India, Mr. Penn?"

"It is rather a long story, Mrs. Herbert," he replied, still standing. "It concerns an uncle of mine who died many years ago."

"How interesting. You must tell us about it. Are you feeling stronger now? I used to be such a poor sailor myself." Mrs. Herbert smiled sympathetically. It was a charming, friendly smile that altered her rather severe features.

"Yes, I'm nearly myself again, thank you. I'm even looking forward to going ashore at Marseilles."

From thence onwards Clive saw a good deal of the Herberts. They were attracted by his fresh enthusiasms and pleasant manners, and he liked the easy self-assurance and intelligence of Colonel Herbert and the poise of his kind-hearted wife, who, however, made it clear she had no use for fools or snobs. He played bridge with them and Lady Constant and had long talks with the colonel, which generally ended up with India. In was not until Suez had been passed, however, that the reason for Clive's trip was broached by Mrs. Herbert. One hot, airless night after dinner, when no one felt inclined to play bridge, a party was sitting in a semi-circle on deck. Mrs. Herbert had been talking to a man on her right, when turning suddenly to Clive, she smiled.

"I have meant to ask you why it was you picked on India for a visit," she said pleasantly. "I think you said it had something to do with a relative of yours?"

Colonel Herbert, hearing his wife's remark, moved his chair nearer and added his request to hers. Clive, having prepared himself for this moment, told what had occurred since he had come down from Oxford. He adroitly skated over his rustication, and, as he looked older than he was, there was no cause for comment by his listeners. During the narrative, when mentioning his uncle's shooting trips in India and elsewhere, the colonel stifled an exclamation, which his wife noticed.

"It is quite a romantic story," she said when Clive came to the end. "Your uncle must have been an unusual man. And I do agree with his ideas on education." Mrs. Herbert glanced across at her husband. "What made you gasp just now, Peter?" she enquired.

"Only that I remembered why Penn sounded familiar when this young fellow first told me his name." The colonel looked at Clive. "It was because I met your uncle in India. It must have been in 1909 or 10 when I hadn't been out there long. I was a subaltern and we travelled up in the same carriage from Delhi to Rawal Pindi. I remember thinking he was a grand chap, but I completely forgot his name. He did me a good turn too."

"What was that, Peter? Was it the time you lost your baggage and bearer on the way to the station in Delhi?" suggested Mrs. Herbert.

"Yes, and wasn't I mad about it." The colonel addressed Clive again. "I'd been down in Delhi on duty and was returning

to my regiment in Peshawar. Being late I had to catch a certain train. My damn fool of a bearer failed to arrive with my kit so I was forced to go on without him."

"But didn't the bearer turn up all right in Peshawar?"

"Yes, he did, Mary, but when I got into the carriage I had nothing but what I stood up in. Only one other fellow was there, and that was your uncle. He was surrounded by more gun cases and fishing tackle than I have ever seen, before or since. When he heard what had happened he did his best to help. Loaned me his bearer, bedding, and shaving kit. He even shared his food and drinks with me. He talked a lot about shooting, but I never learned what he was. I remember he was on his way to Kashmir to stalk snow leopards, or something of that sort. We parted at Pindi. I never saw him again, although he did write a couple of letters, but as he gave no address I couldn't reply."

"What a curious coincidence, Peter," cried Mrs. Herbert, turning to Clive. "My husband always has had a shocking memory for names. Now we can repay your uncle's kindness. You must come and stay with us in Maddabad, mustn't he, Peter?"

"Yes, of course. I was going to invite him myself," replied the colonel heartily. "We shall be able to show a bit of India which is interesting. It's an astonishing mixture of old-fashioned customs and modern ideas."

Clive was pleasantly surprised and his face showed it.

"I'd love to come and stay with you. It's awfully nice of you both to ask me."

"Good. Then that's settled." The colonel glanced across at his wife. "What was it that writer fellow said, Mary? Something about the past always being a shadow behind us which sometimes gets round and faces you. It seems to have done it now."

Mrs. Herbert agreed and the conversation turned to Clive's plans for the future.

"I shall stay a few days in Bombay and then go up to Agra, because I'm frightfully keen to see the Taj Mahal," he explained.

"And after that?"

"I'm not quite sure, sir. You see I have got a long list of places to visit, but in no fixed order. I think Delhi would come next before going north."

"Well, I think, young fellow, it would be better if you came to us after the Taj. It will be easier because we're not far away. And I shall be able to give you some tips about life out there."

"Yes, do come to us then," said Mrs. Herbert. "We shall have settled in. If you leave it until later on the weather gets hot. Now it's delightful, and there will be lots going on."

Clive allowed himself to be persuaded and shortly afterwards the party broke up. An hour later, after several drinks in the smoking saloon, he lay on his berth in the hot cabin and tried to sleep. His brain, however, remained clear and active, although his thoughts were disconnected. He wondered what his cabin mate was doing. What a curious chap he was; not unlike an amiable owl with his round face, brown eyes and large glasses. He used the cabin as if he were an intruder rather than an occupier. And why did he stammer in that nervous way when spoken to?

One night after more than the usual allowance of drink, Clive had been extremely rude to the little man, who had slipped when climbing into his upper berth. He had not touched Clive lying in the lower, and the lapse had been unkind and uncalled for. Clive wished he had apologized the next morning. Why hadn't he? He told himself it was because the fellow had scuttled off to the bathroom and remained there until the cabin had been vacated. But he knew this was only partly the reason; actually he had not wanted to apologize.

Dismissing these unpleasant recollections his thoughts turned to the Herberts' invitation. It was decent of them to have asked him, but how long should he stay? That was an awkward problem which he considered at length. He decided in the end that it would have to be solved later on. Perhaps he could ask someone for advice.

CHAPTER III

On arrival in Bombay the Herberts managed to find time to smooth out many small difficulties for Clive. As soon as he parted from them a dapper little man, a local tourist agent, took charge of him. In a short time, and with no difficulty, he found himself being driven in a large saloon car through the noisy, busy streets of the port to the Taj Mahal Hotel. The agent, proving a source of reliable information, dispelled many of Clive's qualms. Doubts vanished like a morning mist under the man's cheery smile and efficient manner. Clive decided he was going to enjoy Bombay.

A fortnight later, at the end of a tiresome, dusty, cross-country journey his train drew into the large station at

Maddashah, the capital of Maddabad State. Clive had grown accustomed to moiling crowds on railway stations, but staring out on to the platform he thought for a moment a riot was in progress. A compact mass of people surged to and fro in extreme agitation. Indians of all classes, races, and creeds struggled either to get into the train, or to fight their way off it. Mothers, aunts, cousins, coolies, babus, bunnias, food vendors, water carriers, small children, and animals of various kinds, were all present. Each passenger, or would-be passenger, carried numerous bundles as they charged each other, with progeny clinging to portions of clothing and screaming,.

Clive's bearer, sent down to Bombay by the Herberts, appeared at the carriage door from his own compartment and suggested his master should alight. Clive hesitated for a moment and then stepped down into the crowd which promptly closed round him. It was mid-day and hot, and he wrinkled his nose at the pungent odours. Indians, smelling of perspiration, stale butter, rank tobacco, and unclean child, surged around him like angry waters, but Colonel Herbert suddenly appeared out of the mob and Clive greeted him with relief. They shook hands warmly.

"Is it generally like this?" enquired Clive, indicating the crowd.

"Yes, on most days. This is the principal train and Indians always make a fuss about train journeys."

The colonel took his guest by the arm and led him away, saying the bearer would look after the luggage. At the station exit he indicated a small group of aristocratic Indians standing quietly to one side. They made a gay splash of colour in long brocaded coats and coloured turbans as they spoke among themselves and glanced at the crowd with expressionless faces.

"Those are palace officials" he said. "The Maharajah has another prince staying with him and these fellows are here to meet some of the rajah's staff who have come by train."

Clive nodded, gave up his ticket and they went out on to a wide open space littered with one-horsed vehicles, battered motor cars of extreme age, and still more ancient light lorries. Parked on the left was the colonel's long grey limousine with huge headlamps and spotless, gleaming bodywork.

With his host driving and Clive beside him they moved on to a wide road lined on one side by open-fronted shops, and on the other with tall trees and long mud walls which hid gardens and backyards. Swinging left under the railway, the car glided with

increasing speed into a park-like area where many side roads ran in all directions under shady trees. As they proceeded, Colonel Herbert pointed out items of interest. He explained they were now in what corresponded to a cantonment area, the city lying behind on the far side of the station. The colonel indicated a mass of trees in the distance which he said hid the club ; and beyond this lay the palace.

"Are there many Europeans here?" asked Clive, as they swept past several large bungalows standing in well-kept gardens.

"No, not many. About twenty in all, and most of those are minor officials," answered the colonel. "Only a few belong to the club."

At this point the car swung in through wide gates, up a short drive to a long, low bungalow built of red stone, which had mellowed to the colour of old rose, and Clive had a swift impression of velvet turf and flower beds ablaze with colour.

Colonel Herbert had sounded his horn as he approached, with the result his wife was standing on the verandah above the steps leading down on to the drive. Wearing a thin dress of blue and white silk she looked cool and graciously charming. She waved her hand as Clive came up the steps.

"How do you do, Mr. Penn," she said shaking hands. "I'm so pleased you have arrived. My husband was busy and afraid he might not have been able to get down to meet you." She smiled. "You might have had to find your own way here, because I couldn't face those awful crowds that collect at the station." Turning she led the way into a spacious lounge.

The Herberts' bungalow had been built by a past resident, at the maharajah's request and expense, and was typical of what an Indian bungalow should be and rarely is. It was carefully planned with many modern conveniences and furnished in the same manner as a comfortable English home, Mrs. Herbert refusing to mix Asiatic and European furniture.

Clive was taken at once to his room to prepare for tiffen and he quickly appreciated the extreme but unostentatious luxury of this home, over which hung an atmosphere of friendly comfort ; in the days to come he was to remember this with fearful clarity. In his room he discovered that nothing a male guest might require had been overlooked. There were a trouser press, a tie press, shoe racks, spare studs, and even pairs of black and brown shoe laces. Dotted about the room on tables were boxes containing various brands of cigarettes ; matches, ash

trays, pipe cleaners, and assortments of reading material. In a cabinet he found a comprehensive stock of drinks and mineral waters. It was this, more than anything else, that made him realise here was an establishment run with carefully considered efficiency.

He washed in the adjoining bathroom and after tidying himself made his way back to the lounge. The room was empty and the silence unbroken except for the distant buzzing of insects beyond the verandah. It was cool and the light subdued in contrast to the brilliant sunshine and fierce heat outside. Scattered over the highly polished floor were beautiful rugs. There were deep armchairs, low tables, and towards the rear stood a large grand piano on which were a few ornaments and photographs in silver frames. Clive went across and looked at them. Two were of children, three of minor royaltes, and others of friends or relatives. It was, however, a photograph in a huge and ornate frame that caught and held his attention. It showed a slim young Indian, splendid in old fashioned Indian court dress. He stood with a slender hand resting on the bejewelled hilt of a curved sword. The clean cut features showed high breeding, but the face was beginning to grow plump, and there was a faint Hebrew air about it. The photograph was signed in one corner with bold, flowing strokes. Clive read the word 'Alangir' and guessed this must be the Maharajah of Maddabad.

He turned as he became aware that his hosts were approaching from the far end of the room.

"I see you were looking at George," said Mrs. Herbert as she drew near. "We call him that between ourselves, you know." She glanced at her husband. "We are both very fond of him, although he is a little wild now and again."

At that moment the butler announced tiffen and they passed into the dining-room. As they sat down at a large oval table, Mrs. Herbert proceeded to give a word picture of the prince. Clive learned that he was a first-class horseman, played polo well and was a fine shot.

"You may see him at the club this evening," remarked the colonel. "He often goes after polo to play bridge. We don't play there ourselves because the stakes are large. A rupee a hundred is too high for us."

Clive agreed it was a lot of money and then enquired if there would be any chance of his meeting the prince.

"It rather depends. If he comes out on to the main verandah and I get the chance I'll introduce you. Anyway I will get you

to meet the private secretary, and after you've called at the palace you may get an invitation of some sort. That should amuse you, because as well as the Rajah of Bogra, he's got several exotic young women from home staying in the palace."

"Do you mean English girls, sir?"

Both the hosts laughed.

"Yes, of course," answered the colonel. "He has relays of them at this time of year. They are—well." He hesitated for a moment. "You will see for yourself."

"Do they use the club?"

"Yes, all four of them, but they're rather self-conscious where my wife and I are concerned."

Clive was now asked how he had liked the Taj Mahal and what he thought of India. He replied enthusiastically and spoke graphically and amusingly about his experiences in Bombay and his train journeys.

The meal over, Clive's hosts retired to their rooms for the usual siesta and he followed their example. Tea was served in the lounge at half past four and then Mrs. Herbert, using the second car, took her guest on a tour of the city. They drove to the station and passing it came upon an open space where the high, red walls of the city reared up. The car was stopped near the main gateway and getting out, they wandered among a large crowd.

The space, used as a market, was an animated and colourful scene. Sellers of vegetables, grains, pottery, and trinkets squatted behind their wares. Peasants mingled with the townsfolk, gossiping, bargaining, and commenting upon the goods displayed. Their clothes were nondescript but now and again were flashes of crude colour from a magenta, blue, or vivid yellow shawl or turban. A soft chattering rose up on the still air in which floated many of the exciting Eastern smells. Behind the red walls the sun was sinking, and the golden air shimmered in dust raised by countless shuffling sandals.

Mrs. Herbert suggested that they should go into the city. Walking towards the huge double gateway they passed tiny shops built against the walls and all were gay with brightly coloured wares. There were stacked bales of softly-tinted silks, rolls of vividly-dyed cottons, and strange crimson garments fluttered from pegs high in the walls. Clive noticed that in some of these shops were cheap-jack European goods consisting of celluloid articles dyed pink, blue, or yellow, and children's toys were also conspicuous.

"I find the old city fascinating," said Mrs. Herbert as they neared the gate. "Once inside you go back through the centuries. Life goes on as it always has done and nothing seems to have changed."

"Yes, I agree it is fascinating," answered Clive, genuinely interested in the sights about him. "Everyone seems so cheerful, and not glum like the crowds in the Bombay bazaars."

His hostess nodded as they worked their way forward through the crowd.

"Yes, that is because this state is prosperous and the people are not heavily taxed. Now in Bogra State it's quite different, and you can sense the wretchedness of the people almost as soon as you arrive. By the way, I think we told you it is the Rajah of Bogra who is now staying in the palace."

"Yes you did, but why should there be such a difference between states?"

"It rests with the ruler as far as I can judge," she replied. "The Rajah of Bogra, for example, is very old fashioned and hates modern improvements of any kind. His people live almost entirely to support the palace and they are not considered in the least."

"But haven't they got a resident like you have here?"

"Yes, they have." Mrs. Herbert sighed. "But a resident can only guide and advise. If the ruler refuses to listen he can do little unless things get too outrageous."

"I see. So the Government of India doesn't interfere with the states?"

"Not unless there is something very wrong going on. Officially the Indian states are as well administered as our own."

"I suppose all kinds of strange things happen which are never made public?"

"Yes, strange and terrible things sometimes. If news of them does leak out then, of course, our government takes action. A ruler was deposed only last year."

"Oh, why?" asked Clive quickly.

"Among other things he poured petrol over a polo pony and burnt it alive because it did something to dispease him." Mrs. Herbert shuddered. "And that was the least of his crimes."

Side by side they passed under the gateway where the roadway became narrow and uneven, and over it moved a stream of congested traffic. Women and children carrying bundles of all shapes and sizes disputed the right of way with laden asses and wandering cows. Men stood in groups gossiping and were

good-humouredly pushed aside by those on more urgent business.

The couple stopped frequently at the tiny open-fronted shops of the silversmiths which now lined the road inside the walls. They watched craftsmen fashioning the more popular forms of crude jewellery. In some shops long double, and even treble, chains of linked silver were being dealt with, heavy anklets were hammered, while tiny nose roses, bangles, and rings for the toes were on display in cases with glass fronts. Clive was intrigued by the extremely primitive appliances used, by the tiny charcoal fires, and drills worked by the toes. He commented eagerly on what he noticed, and this pleased and amused Mrs. Herbert.

Passing deeper into the city, they came to an open space from which branched several roads leading into the heart of the mass of tall, mud-walled houses. Then came the dyers' quarters, beyond which was the quaint little post office at the top of a flight of insecure stairs, and so on to various Hindu temples and other sights.

Mrs. Herbert suddenly glanced at her wrist watch and seeing it was growing late they hurried back to the car. Clive was then driven off to write his name in the visitor's book at the palace before going on to the club, where Colonel Herbert was waiting.

The club was a single-storied, rambling building standing in spacious grounds in which were tennis courts, stretches of fine turf, and many flower beds. Beyond the gardens, on the western side, was the polo ground, now dusty and yellow from lack of rain. The building consisted of the usual deep verandahs. Opening on to them were reading rooms, card rooms, a library, a dance floor, and a small but up-to-date cocktail bar. Facing the main verandah was a square terrace of turf where on hot nights, members moved out and sat under the clear sky, hoping to catch any stray breezes that might develop.

When Mrs. Herbert and Clive drove up to the entrance it was dark, and the bright lights were cheerful and inviting. In the hall Clive was instructed to leave a visiting card on the club president and members. This duty done, they passed on out into the main verandah. Here Colonel Herbert was seated talking to a hatchet-faced man with grey twinkling eyes. Both men got up as they approached.

"Ah, there you are, Mary," said the colonel briskly. "I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you." He then introduced Clive to his companion. "This is Clive Penn, the young fellow I mentioned who is staying with us, Thompson,"

he said as his wife sat down. He glanced at Clive. "This is Mr. Thompson, our surgeon." The colonel winked. "He'll cut you up in a jiffy if he gets the chance. Regular saw-bones, he is."

The surgeon shook hands and grinned.

"So you're out here on a visit, I hear," he remarked as they sat down. "And how do you like Maddabad?"

"It's awfully interesting, what I've seen of it," replied Clive smiling in return. "Mrs. Herbert and I have been on a visit to the city."

The surgeon shrugged his shoulders and made a slight grimace.

"Yes, I suppose it's romantic to a newcomer, but when you've been out as long as I have, bazaars merely become dull and smelly places." He then turned, addressed Mrs. Herbert and they discussed a personal matter.

Clive shifted his chair so as to look down the length of the verandah where groups of people were seated beside tables on which were drinks and ash trays. Immediately to his right was a flaxen haired woman wearing a short skirt and a tightly fitting jumper. She smoked a cigarette from a long holder and sat with crossed, stockingless legs. Her finger nails, and toe nails showing through open work sandals, were lacquered a bright blue. Two young Indians in expensive tweeds were facing her and talking in bored tones. Beyond the woman, people were moving to and fro about the entrance to the hall. There were a few Europeans among the Indians, who were in flannels, riding kit, or suits.

Clive then turned his attention to the terrace lighted by electric bulbs strung from taut wires. Here thirty or forty Indians were standing in small parties. They were, for the most part, clad in court dress with long, tight, brocaded coats, white jodphurs and highly decorated sandals. Most of the older men carried ceremonial swords at their sides, and some had beards, or huge moustaches brushed up and across the face, giving them fierce expressions.

Clive caught the colonel's eye and leaned forward.

"Who are they?" he asked, indicating the men on the terrace. "Are they courtiers?"

"Yes, but most of them belong to the Rajah of Bogra's staff," answered Colonel Herbert. "You see that old gentleman over there talking to the young fellow? He's George's uncle."

Clive looked and was impressed. The courtier was wearing a magnificent gold brocade coat, a golden sword, and heavy gold

anklets. His face was patriarchal and his manner grave with immense dignity.

"He is an interesting old chap and can tell you weird yarns if you get him going," continued the colonel. "Pity you don't speak the language, because he can't or won't speak English. He is talking to George's heir."

"Heir?" exclaimed Clive astonished. "Hasn't the maharajah got a son of his own? That fellow is as old as I am, I should say."

"He's been adopted. You see, princes often select their heirs from some leading family. His Highness was adopted himself. It was found in the old days that it prevented family complications."

Clive looked puzzled, but changed the subject by asking if the English girls from the palace were present in the club.

"They were performing on the dance floor to a gramophone when I arrived," said the colonel grimly. "I expect they are still at it."

As he spoke two young women, one dark and the other fair, came out on to the verandah and stood looking round with a faintly supercilious air; an air assumed by the young when they are not sure of themselves.

"There are two of them now," continued the colonel. "What do you think of them?"

Clive regarded the girls closely and then smiled. They were slightly over-dressed, elaborately made up, and wore jewellery in the form of jangling bracelets and bead necklaces.

"Not much, sir. I wonder where they come from?"

"Probably the chorus, or something of that sort."

Mrs. Herbert got to her feet saying she was going to look for a woman friend and the surgeon announced he must be leaving, so Colonel Herbert took Clive off to the cocktail bar. The bar was small and decorated in bright, clear colours, with chromium-plated tables and chairs, and high stools before the bar itself.

The bar was crowded and Clive was promptly introduced to young, well-groomed Indians who spoke perfect English and whose manners were polite and friendly. He was then presented to the club secretary, a long lean Scotsman, with sandy hair and angry blue eyes who informed him that he could consider himself an honorary member of the club during his stay. Clive thanked him and was then left to himself, while Colonel Herbert talked to another Englishman who was not introduced.

Sipping a strong cocktail he watched several Indians with clear-cut features who were laughing and chatting together

and suddenly he realised that these young men were remarkably like himself. He had come out to the country convinced that Indians were, in every way, inferior. He now experienced healthy doubt on the subject. He frankly admitted to himself that their manners, and poise, were far in advance of men of their own age and class at home. His self-esteem had also received a decided setback. He had been asked by these young men if he were going to play polo or tennis, and had been forced to admit he could not ride, and was a poor hand on the tennis court. He also feared that, before the evening was over, he would have to confess he had never handled a rifle or a gun.

A sudden, pronounced hush settled on the gathering and Clive turned sharply to see the cause of it. Entering the bar was a young man in European clothes who he guessed must be the maharajah. With him was a much older and taller man, also dressed in a lounge suit, but with a tightly wound pugri set aslant on his hair. Clive knew this must be the Rajah of Bogra. The maharajah unsmilingly greeted Colonel Herbert, who was standing near the door, and the latter beckoned to Clive, who slipped off his stool and went across.

"Your Highness, may I introduce Mr. Penn, a friend of mine who is staying with us," said the colonel briskly. "He has come out on a visit to India."

The prince glanced for a long moment at Clive, slightly lowered his head, and turning away spoke to his companion. Colonel Herbert caught Clive's arm and led him back to the bar.

"Should I have said something?" enquired Clive anxiously.

"No, I don't think so. He rarely shakes hands, and generally behaves like that at a first meeting. That's Bogra with him." The colonel lowered his voice. "An old devil if there is one. Makes me shiver. Take a look at his eyes, if you get the chance. There's a glint in them like a tigeress."

Clive saw at once what Colonel Herbert meant. The rajah's face was fat and sagging, his lips full, his skin dark and rough. His eyes were black, but Clive could have sworn there were flecks of yellow in them. They were eyes showing a danger signal as clearly as a red lamp or flag.

"See what I mean?" said the colonel, and Clive nodded. "I'm surprised he's wearing European clothes. I suppose he is doing it as a compliment to George. I've never before seen him in anything but the most orthodox Indian rigout."

"He may be changing his ideas, sir. Becoming more up-to-date and that sort of thing."

The elder man shook his head.

"I very much doubt it. This tiger won't change his skin as easily as that." He blew out his cheeks. "I shouldn't like to get in his bad books. Willis is his resident, and I don't envy him his job." The colonel finished his drink. "Come along. Let's go. It's getting late."

Clive emptied his cocktail glass, and set it down on the bar. As he did so the thin stem snapped off close to the base and the bowl toppled over and smashed. The barman drying a glass, stared at the accident with startled consternation.

"That is bad luck, Huzoor," he said, quickly gathering up the pieces. "The Heaven Born should walk warily."

Colonel Herbert laughed as he turned away.

"Rubbish," he said scornfully. "Funny ideas these Indians get. Come on, young fellow. I'll drive you home. The wife's gone already."

At dinner when sipping his sherry, Clive remembered the glass incident and mentioned it to his hostess.

"How strange," she said seriously. "I wonder why it happened? I am from the West Country and we are all a little superstitious there, you know. I have never heard that a breaking glass was unlucky. A mirror, yes, but not an ordinary glass." She changed the subject abruptly. "I hear Bogra was at the club tonight wearing a lounge suit. I wish I had seen him. I can't imagine what he looked like."

"As usual, not exactly prepossessing, my dear," replied the colonel smiling. "By the way, and entirely between ourselves." He glanced to see that the servants were out of the room. "Thompson told me this evening Bogra has been coveting his host's goods. That will cause a rumbling in the palace, I should say."

"What do you mean, Peter?"

"Why the young women, of course. There is a limit to hospitality and George knows it well."

"Good gracious. I hope there won't be any trouble."

"I shouldn't think so. Sundra Nath will see to that." Colonel Herbert glanced at his guest. "He's the Diwan. Prime minister you know, and runs most of the palace intrigue, at least among the older men. And it's not a little, I can assure you, even in this up-to-date state."

A servant coming into the room caused the conversation to change and Clive asked who the fair woman was that had been sitting near them on the verandah.

"Oh, you mean Mrs. Strammer." The colonel caught his wife's eye and faint shake of her head. "She is the wife of a famous geologist. George has got a bee in his bonnet about oil. He's convinced the stuff is to be found somewhere in the state. Strammer has told him there isn't a drop hereabouts, but George tells him to go on searching."

"And does he?" enquired Clive laughing.

"Yes. He is very well paid for his work and loves shooting. His wife, well—well, she seems to enjoy herself with the younger set at the palace. Must be a bit of a change for her. He is a dreamy sort of chap until he gets a gun in his hand, but we don't see much of either of them."

CHAPTER IV

In the days that followed Clive spent the mornings wandering about the countryside. He visited the city twice, and on several occasions reached villages lying to the east. After tea he was taken to watch polo, or tennis matches, or his hostess took him to other European's bungalows. There were dinner parties, and parties at the Herbert's home, which were usually confined to one guest who played bridge afterwards.

At the club Clive became friendly with several young Indians, but found conversation with them something of an effort. They wished to hear his views on Indian problems, and these being vague in the extreme, conversation was one sided. Towards the end of an evening in the bar, however, his tongue was loosened and he talked amusingly to his eager listeners of Oxford and village life at home.

The time arrived at last when Clive knew that he must move on, having been told that ten days was the limit of his visit to the Herberts. At breakfast one morning he broached the subject. Both his hosts at once pressed him to remain, but he insisted he must leave in two days time.

"But you have not yet had an invitation from the palace," said Mrs. Herbert. "We did so want you to see what it is like. Dinner parties there are fascinating for the first time."

Clive shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Yes, but it might be weeks before an invitation arrived, Mrs. Herbert," he said regretfully. "Besides I have already booked my room at the hotel in Delhi."

"Well, if you must go, you must." The colonel nodded. "I will get those letters of introduction written for you. You'll find them useful."

Clive thanked him and the conversation turned upon his plans.

On his last evening he went to the club alone. His hostess had a previous engagement and the colonel was occupied with official business. It was early when he arrived and only a few people were scattered about the grounds. Crossing the terrace he went down to watch a four at tennis, but quickly becoming bored, returned to the club house and bar, which was empty. He felt extremely depressed. He had had a grand time with the Herberts, not exciting or riotous, but pleasantly luxurious, and now he must go off and make new acquaintances and find his own amusements. He ordered a double peg of whisky from the barman. He knew he should not be depressed. Did not all India lay open to him?

His thoughts turned to Delhi and he wondered what the hotel was going to be like, and whom he would meet there. He wished he had read more on the history of India. He must buy some books about the subject and read them on the train journeys.

It grew dark and people began to drift into the bar. The club secretary was the first to arrive and he accepted a drink offered by Clive.

"I hear you are off tomorrow," he observed, drawing up a stool. "I hope you've enjoyed your stay with us here in Maddashah?"

"Yes rather, thanks. I'm damned sorry to be leaving."

"Where is your next port of call?"

"Delhi for a week or so, then Lahore and so up north to Peshawar."

The secretary drank from his glass and looked doubtful.

"If I'd been you I should have gone straight to Peshawar. It's grand there now with all the roses out, and a hell of a lot going on. Racing, and hunting, and golf, and all that sort of thing. It gets rather sticky later on, you know."

"Oh, I thought it got cooler the further north you went," replied Clive, mildly surprised.

"No, not really. Peshawar has a lot of water knocking about and so is damp. Delhi, and down here, do get hot, but it's dry heat until the rains come."

The secretary then discussed Kashmir while they had another round of drinks. By this time Clive was beginning to feel cheerful.

"You know, I'm sorry I have not been asked to the palace," he said suddenly. "Colonel Herbert did introduce me to His Highness and I called. I've been wondering why nothing has happened."

His companion grinned, and seeing that the barman was just out of hearing, he lowered his voice.

"That's easy to answer. You know there are four young women staying with him. Well, it might be a bit awkward your meeting them at the palace, being the same age and race. See what I mean?"

"Why yes, of course. I never thought of that," exclaimed Clive. "That must be the reason."

Two Indians in tennis clothes now came into the bar and the secretary changed the subject. Seeing Clive, the newcomers came to the bar and greeted him enthusiastically. They nodded to the secretary who finished his drink and slipped off his stool, saying he must do some work. Clive ordered drinks and his companions expressed regret at his departure. The younger of the two men, on learning that Clive was going to Delhi, insisted he should visit a school friend who was the son of a well-known art dealer in the old cantonments. Pencils and paper were called for and the name and address written down. Clive was then made to promise he would look up the man who, he was assured, would show him many unusual and interesting things.

By half past seven Clive was feeling the world was a fine place and his companions grand fellows. Suddenly there came from the verandah outside the bar the sound of talking and shrill feminine laughter. The swing doors flew open and a crowd of people surged in. Leading them was Mrs. Strammer, and about her the four young women from the palace. At their heels were several Indians in well-cut, saxon tweeds. The party had clearly been drinking elsewhere and was in a riotous mood.

Mrs. Strammer, in a thin, sleeveless silk dress, came to the bar beside Clive where she ordered a round of complicated and expensive cocktails. Ignoring him she turned to carry on a high-pitched conversation while the drinks were being prepared. Clive gathered from the laughter and sallies that someone called Bill had made a fool of himself and said the wrong thing to a personage. He wondered if it were Bogra or George.

One of the girls, a short, fair, plump person caught his eye, smiled coyly, and then winked. Clive smiled and looked away. The drinks were now handed round and the party moved to a table on the far side of the room. His late companions having

slipped away, Clive watched the party for some time until Mrs. Strammer glanced up and looked in his direction. She regarded him for a long moment over the rim of her glass. Putting it on the table she said something to one of the men, got to her feet and moved towards Clive.

"You're staying with the Herberts, aren't you?" she said loudly and a little aggressively. "Why haven't you called on us?"

The question caused Clive acute embarrassment, especially as he knew the room must have heard it. Flushing deeply he got off his stool and muttered something about not knowing why.

The woman laughed artificially and caught his forearm.

"What the hell does it matter, anyway? Come over and join the party, and don't be so damned standoffish."

Still confused, Clive allowed himself to be led across the room. He was introduced to the girls, whose names were Mabel, Doris, June, and Mona, and they stated one at a time that they were pleased to meet him. More cocktails were ordered and Mrs. Strammer lost interest in Clive as she laughed with the Indians. Seated next to Doris, Clive looked at her and she regarded him haughtily.

"I hear you are staying at the palace," he said. "I expect you're having a wonderful time?"

"It's ever so nice, thank you," replied the girl coldly. Her frigid manner, however, suddenly thawed and she giggled. "He's a lovely boy, he is. See what he gave me today." She held up a pale, thin wrist on which was a magnificent embossed gold bracelet studded with square, flawed rubies.

Clive admired it and the girl, turning to Mona beside her, caught her hand and held it up.

"See what she's got, too," she announced, indicating a ring with a large single emerald. "Nice, isn't it?"

Mona snatched her hand away and scowled.

"Don't be so vulgar, Doris, showing off like that," she said sharply. "What'll he be thinking of us?"

"Oh, don't be so grumpy," answered Doris amiably. "Let's have some more cocktails. These drinks are tops if you ask me. I feel like a million. Don't you?" She giggled at her companion, who replied he thought them very good.

Clive, well primed with liquor, soon became the centre of the party where drinks came and vanished at frequent intervals. The time when he should have left to return for dinner grew long past, but suddenly one of the girls glanced at a tiny watch and gave a shriek.

"Oh, how late it's got. We must be getting back. There's a party on."

Clive also looked at his wrist watch and realised he would have to hurry if he were not to keep his hosts waiting for dinner. Excusing himself he got to his feet, swayed slightly, and made for the door, followed by a chorus of farewells.

He felt thoroughly irritated and aggrieved, but knew he had to go. What a damned nuisance it was. He had been having a first class time. Cursing under his breath he pushed the swing doors and went on to the verandah where cooler air struck his heated face. Turning left he made his way to the toilet which was at the far end of a narrow passage and with an entrance of half-swing doors. Hurrying unsteadily down the passage he violently pushed both doors open and came face to face with an Indian who was on the point of leaving. It was the Rajah of Bogra in Indian costume, and Clive failed to recognise him : all he saw, in his semi-intoxicated state, was an Indian standing in his path. One man clearly had to step aside to allow the other to pass. Without consideration Clive shot out a hand and caught the Rajah of Bogra on the point of the shoulder to sweep him aside. The rajah, however, stiffened and refused to move. Clive glared at him and pushed strongly.

"Get out of my way, you black beast," he cried. "Who the hell do you think you are? An Englishman?"

The push was strong enough to cause the rajah to step back a pace. Clive passed on muttering to himself. He did not see the light gleaming momentarily in the Indian's eyes ; had he done so it would have pulled him up abruptly. The Rajah of Bogra stared at the Englishman's back, turned, and opening the doors went out into the passage. Five minutes later Clive, hurrying home in a hired car, had forgotten the incident.

The Herberts, guessing their visitor had been caught up in a party, did not wait but went into dinner. When he appeared, flustered and apologetic half-way through the meal, they laughed and passed the matter off pleasantly and tactfully.

"Whose party were you in?" asked Mrs. Herbert as Clive refused soup and went straight to the meat course.

The effect of the cocktails was still strong, but he managed fairly well to disguise his condition as he described the scene in the bar. Colonel Herbert was amused, but his wife looked anxious and frowned as she listened. It was clear to her from Mrs. Strammer's question to Clive that she was aware the Herberts disapproved of her general conduct. This was

unfortunate, because they had been careful to be non-committal, and not to express any views on this subject. In a small community of Europeans such as theirs care had to be taken to avoid friction.

"Was George there this evening?" enquired the colonel.

"I didn't see him, sir."

"I rather expected he wouldn't be because they are having a farewell party for Bogra. He leaves tomorrow afternoon." The colonel sighed. "After he has gone I shall have a difficult interview with His Highness. That is why I was particularly interested in your description of the young women this evening. I have not spoken to any of them myself. Did you by any chance talk to a girl called Mona Smith?"

"Well, sir, there was a girl called Mona sitting near me, but I didn't speak to her."

"What was she like?"

Clive strove to remember, but was only able to describe the girl in vague terms. The colonel nodded and explained he had been told to find out if a girl of this name were staying in Maddashah.

"She seems to have gone off without letting anyone at home know where she was going. Of course, she was free to do as she wished, but her relations became anxious and enquiries were begun. It was found she had come out to India with these other girls and so I've been asked to collect information."

"Oh, I suppose you'll have to talk to George about her, sir?"

"Yes, and I don't want to. What goes on in the palace in that sort of way is no business of mine, or the government's either. However tactful I am, George is bound to take umbrage. It's a damned nuisance. Why can't girls stay at home where they should be?" The colonel rubbed his nose and hesitated for a moment. "By the way, young fellow, I shouldn't talk about them when you leave here. There's nothing wrong, of course, but some people have fixed ideas. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I'll keep it to myself."

At ten-thirty the next morning Clive stood on the station platform outside his compartment. With him were the Herberts and several Indians. The latter had garlanded him with long, fat necklaces of flowers, and there was much good fellowship.

"You seem to have gone down very well with your young friends," said Colonel Herbert in a quick aside. "Good for you. I like to see that sort of thing. I wish there was more of it. If you keep it up you should have a good time out here."

After an orgy of handshaking and many expressions of good wishes Clive got into his compartment and the train pulled out.

The long, dusty journey up to Delhi was boring and his spirits sank low. He was feeling some effects of the party at the club, he was alone, and the countryside flat and uninteresting. At the back of his mind was a nagging thought he had behaved badly at the club, but he was unable to remember anything in particular that he had said or done which would account for this feeling.

It was late afternoon when he arrived at the great central station, dusty, unfed, and tired. He lost his temper when unable to locate a porter from his hotel, although every other porter from every other hotel in Delhi appeared to be present, and each implored him to come to his particular establishment. Engaging a taxi and leaving the bearer to come on with the luggage he arrived at the George Hotel, where he raised his voice in bitter complaint concerning the missing porter. The management attempted to soothe him, but on being shown his rooms he promptly objected to them, condemning their size, position, and general undesirableness. He was given better ones for the same price. He then felt better, especially after he had inspected the large, cool lounge, and caught a glimpse of a pleasant swimming bath in the grounds.

After dinner in a crowded room, he sat in the lounge and wondered how to amuse himself. The bar was empty and everyone present was either in a party or otherwise engaged. Sitting in a cane chair he suddenly remembered the name and address given to him by one of the Indians in the club at Maddashah. He pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket-book and read 'Rugbar Chand, Palm House, Old Delhi Cantonments.' If the house were nearby he might as well go and see the fellow now, because the letters of introduction from Colonel Herbert were for people living in New Delhi, several miles distant. Enquiries at the office showed that Palm House was not far away.

On the advice of the hotel porter he took a carriage, whose lean horse dashed off through a warm, scented night. Turning suddenly left the vehicle lurched into a wide, semi-circular drive and drew up before a large, flower-covered bungalow where lights glowed from several windows. A smiling, soft-footed servant showed him into a lounge, dimly lit and packed with oriental treasures. Clive gave his name and business and then wandered about the room. There were many glass-topped show cases holding an astonishing assortment of small objects from jewellery to pencases. Hanging from the walls were carpets,

weapons, and brocades, and against the walls, and scattered about the room, stood heavy Indian and Chinese furniture.

"Good evening. I am Bhai Chand," said a voice at his shoulder.

Clive turned sharply and faced an elderly Indian with a short Imperial and the general air of a retired diplomat.

"You have come to see my son?" he continued, his dark eyes beaming in a friendly manner behind large spectacles. "He will be here in a few minutes."

Bhai Chand indicated a carved, blackwood chair and handed his guest an open box of Turkish cigarettes. Clive took one and proceeded to explain the reason for his visit.

"Ah, so you have been in Maddashah. Maddabad is a fine state, a well run state," exclaimed the old gentleman rubbing his hands. "His Highness comes to see me when he is in Delhi. He is a good client of mine. The Rajah of Bogra has been staying with him." Noticing Clive's surprise he smiled and shrugged the shoulders of his dark pin-stripe suit. "You are surprised? I knew it at once. Many people come to this house and we talk, and—." He shrugged again. "It is my business to know of the comings and goings of princes and noblemen."

"Do they buy many of your things?"

"Sometimes, but more often they sell. It is the Americans who buy."

"Sell? Do you mean they offer you jewels and things?" exclaimed Clive, leaning forward in his interest.

Bhai Chand nodded and smiled sardonically.

"But I don't understand," continued Clive. "I thought all Indian rajahs were vastly wealthy, and yet you and Colonel Herbert both say they are constantly in need of money."

"It is true in some cases. It is a rigid custom among our princes that the family treasure must never be touched, indeed it must be added to during the life of a ruler. What you call hard cash must be raised either by taxes, or means of that kind, but never by selling the state treasure. That is why the Maharajah of Maddabad hopes to find oil in his state."

"Oh, so there must be a vast amount of wealth lying hidden away in India?"

"Yes. So vast is it that no one has any idea of its extent. In the past it was a magnet to all our numerous invaders. Even today there are those in the north who cast envious eyes upon it."

"You mean the—," began Clive, but the old gentleman held up a hand and stopped him.

"We will speak no names, but—. Well, you may see. I shall probably be ashes, but the time will come."

Bhai Chand turned in his chair as a slim young man with small, regular features, straight eyebrows, and a clear olive skin came into the room.

"This is my son, my only son," announced the old gentleman proudly. He glanced up. "Rugbar, you have a visitor. He comes from Maddashah and your old friend there."

Rugbar Chand came forward and held out his hand as Clive got to his feet.

"I am glad you have come," he said smiling, showing a perfect set of small, white teeth. "I am sorry I was not here when you arrived. I was drilling a ruby, and such work must not be left."

Clive was then politely questioned as tiny cups of heavily sweetened black coffee were handed round by a servant.

"You must permit my son to show you the sights of Delhi," suggested Bhai Chand. "He knows it well and can show things guides consider of little importance."

The young man, who had been unobtrusively summing up the visitor, now added his agreement and Clive gratefully accepted the offer. It was arranged that Rugbar would call for Clive at his hotel on the following afternoon. He was then shown some of the more unusual of the treasures in the lounge, and it was past eleven o'clock before he arrived back at the George Hotel.

Clive spent much of his time with Rugbar in the days that followed, and they grew to like each other. Clive admired the Indian's clean, fine-drawn breeding, with his easy, charming manners and quick intelligence. Rugbar was attracted by the Englishman's sincere interest in all that he was shown, and his obvious desire to be friendly. Using one of his father's cars, Rugbar took Clive out on to the Delhi Plain, where they explored the seven dead cities, and knowing his history, proved a fascinating guide. They visited the Fort, the Great Mosque, and the Kutb Minar, but Rugbar refused to go out to New Delhi in the capacity of a guide.

"That belongs to you," he said smilingly, when Clive commented on the fact. "What I have shown you belongs to us, and we are proud of it."

One evening, when walking along the famous Ridge, Rugbar took his companion's arm and grinned.

"Before you leave Delhi you should meet a famous person. To have stayed here and not to have met her would, in your case, be a pity."

"Her?" exclaimed Clive.

"Yes. She is Shahmeeran and lives not far from the Chandni Chowk." Rugbar chuckled and led the way down a rough path to the road below. "She is a woman who has known many men. You understand?"

Surprised and amused, Clive said he did, and asked why she was famous.

"It is because in India such women can become very powerful. When they are like Shahmeeran they hold men's destinies and lives in the palms of their hands. Those who seek her favours do not always pay in gold, but in news and secrets. It is said she knows more than anyone in Delhi. Some say, that now Durrani in Peshawar is dead, she is the most feared woman in all India."

"Good Lord, is she?" cried Clive excitedly. "I am learning a thing or two. I always thought women in India didn't count for much. Is she a friend of yours?"

Rugbar, now beside his companion again, glanced at him for a moment as he hesitated.

"You are my friend and because our hearts are soft towards each other we should always speak with open minds."

Clive nodded and wondered what was coming.

"Shahmeeran held me in her arms on the naming day in my first year, but it is my father to whom she is like a sister. News comes to her faster than vultures to dead animals. My father deals in things other than curios—things often more precious than the rarest gem. He who once barters thus can never turn back. It can be stronger to the senses than the heaviest wine."

Clive looked puzzled.

"You mean a sort of secret service, don't you?"

"Perhaps, but until you know India very well you cannot fully understand," answered Rugbar slowly. "You will go to visit Shahmeeran? I will arrange it."

"Yes, of course. I shall look forward to it tremendously. When shall we go?"

"Tonight, if you like. I will enquire. Perhaps she cannot see us. Then we will go tomorrow."

"Are you sure she won't mind my going?"

"Yes. Sahibs do not often visit her, but when you meet someone high up in the government ask him if he knows her. He will admit he has heard her name. If he is of a small mind perhaps he will lie and deny it. I do not know."

Dinner was finished and Clive was talking to a man and his wife in the lounge of the hotel when a message was brought to him saying that Rugbar was waiting at the porch. Excusing himself, he hastened out to his friend seated in the rear of a small car.

"Hullo, Rugbar," he cried wrenching open the door. "So you've fixed it up all right?"

The Indian nodded, but looked doubtfully at Clive, who seeing this, asked the reason.

"You wear a dinner suit. I forgot to tell you not to wear it."

"Does it really matter?"

"Sahibs in dinner jackets do not visit the bazaars, and Shahmeeran does not care for all the world to know who comes to her house."

"Oh, I see. Shall I go and change? It won't take long."

"No. We will draw the blinds, and you can turn up the collar as you leave the car."

The driver was now told to proceed, and as they slid out of the cantonments and passed down the broad Chandni Chowk, with its blazing light, raucous gramophones, and clanging tramcars, Clive asked what Shahmeeran had said concerning his visit. Rugbar, however, held his friend's hand, as is the custom among friends in India, smiled, and said vaguely she would be pleased to see him.

"What shall I talk about?" asked Clive, who was feeling nervous.

"You need not be anxious. She will talk, but you must speak openly. She will read you as you would do an open book."

"Oh! Does she speak English?"

"I am not sure. I have never heard her. I will translate, perhaps. We shall see. Here we are."

The car had turned off the main street into a dark side turning just wide enough to take it. They proceeded a short distance until the driver pulled up before a high wall in which was a heavy door studded with iron. Rugbar, telling Clive to stay where he was, got out and banged heavily. A long pause followed before the door was partly opened and an aged man poked out his head. Rugbar said something to him, and beckoned to Clive.

The door led directly on to a large courtyard, dimly lit by an oil lamp set high in a wall niche. The grizzled ancient led the way across the yard to another door, and stepping aside indicated that the visitors should enter. Rugbar went ahead, and Clive at his heels found himself in complete darkness, stumbling up

a steep and narrow staircase. This ended in what appeared to be a landing, where Rugbar stopped, caught Clive by the arm, and led him up two further flights, which were wider than the first.

Almost without warning they stepped across the threshold of a long, rectangular room directly beneath the roof. It was lighted, not by electricity, but by several exquisite oil lamps hanging from the beams of a highly decorated ceiling. Facing the door were two open windows, and against the wall between them stood a huge divan covered with purple and green brocade, on which were many fat cushions. Scattered over the dark red, wooden floor were glowing carpets on which stood low tables of highly polished blackwood. The walls were panelled, and on them hung a few dainty Indian paintings, several weapons, and pieces of aged brocade. Facing the left-hand window was a mirror reaching from ceiling to floor.

When they entered the room a woman was leaning on the right window-sill gazing out into the dark, starlit night across the compact, uneven mass of roof tops. With a slow, graceful movement she straightened herself and turned to greet her visitors, who stood side by side near the door. She looked first at Rugbar and then at Clive, who drew in his breath sharply. How utterly different this woman was from what he imagined she would be. This was a girl, not a fascinating and highly dangerous woman. Slight and slim as a boy, she held her small head high, with hands at her sides. She wore a gown of pale lemon silk, with a tight, embroidered bodice, short sleeves, and a full skirt reaching to the carpet. Her black hair, smooth as satin, was parted in the middle and drawn back into a roll on the nape of her neck, and her only jewellery was a single ruby blazing on her forehead.

Her face was oval, with a slightly curved nose, sensitive nostrils, and perfect, if somewhat full lips. It was, however, her eyes that caught and held Clive's attention. They were not particularly large or lustrous, but in their dark depths was a light he did not understand; it made the skin between his shoulder blades stir, and he wanted to look away. The woman glided forward a few paces and turned to Rugbar.

"I am honoured beyond all that you should come to this house, my friend," she said speaking in Urdu. "It is many moons since I saw your face. Have I become so undesirable that you shun my company?"

Rugbar wriggled his shoes and showed embarrassment, but Shahmeeran laughed before he could reply.

"I did but tease," she said lightly. "You have better work to do than dallying with such as I. Come, sit, and tell me why you have brought this sahib."

The woman indicated the divan and Rugbar, taking Clive's arm, they crossed and sat down. Shahmeeran perched herself on one of the tables so that she half faced her visitors. She sat with small, hennaed hands resting in her lap, and on her face a serious look.

"Has he no words of greeting?" she said, glancing at Clive for a moment.

"He does not speak Urdu, O Exquisite Enchantment," replied Rugbar quickly.

"Aho, then he has but newly come to this country. It is in my mind he is little more than child in experience, although of pleasing countenance." She paused, and putting her head slightly on one side looked at Clive, who squirmed under the scrutiny. "It is in my mind that his face resembles the hawk. Is his mind quick, or is it slow like the buffalo's, as with most of his race?"

"It is slow, but he has charm, and manners beyond those of most sahibs," answered Rugbar, speaking quickly, in case his companion might understand the Urdu.

"Good. Tell him I am honoured a hundred times by his visit," ordered Shahmeeran, watching Rubgar take out his cigarette case and offer it to Clive, who refused to smoke. "Ask him why he was surprised when first his eyes met mine."

Rugbar translated the question and saw Clive flush.

"Were you surprised?" he continued.

"Yes. She is so different from what I expected," answered Clive reluctantly. "She is almost a girl. I thought she would be quite old."

When this was repeated to Shahmeeran she was highly amused and clapped her hands together.

"By the gods that is sweeter than many subtle flatteries," she said laughing. "He spoke from the heart and not only with the lips. That I welcome. I knew it was thus, but wished to hear it in our words." She shook a hand at Rugbar. "It is now you who are surprised. Yes, I can understand and speak the sahib's language, but from lack of use it lies heavy on my tongue and ear. Because I like this boy, who interests me, I will use it again."

In a stilted manner, and obviously considering each word, she asked Clive concerning himself and his doings. During this conversation she suddenly became grave, and Clive realized she was a great deal older than she appeared to be. The slight

shock of this caused him to break off a sentence and stare at her.

"What is the matter?" she asked, leaning forward and looking into his eyes. "Ahi. I know. I am not as you thought me. It is that?"

Clive gasped at this reading of his thoughts, while Shahmeeran sighed and then smiled a little pathetically.

"How is it said in your speech? One, long ago, told me we are all as young as we feel. It is a great truth." She shivered and changed the subject.

"You lived at Maddashah. Did you talk with Alangir?"

Clive admitted he had met the maharajah.

"His uncle was my great friend. He and I have not met. He is not my friend. He is young in mind. It is in my mind that he is like Akbar's son, Jehangir. Tell me of Herbert sahib. I have heard much good concerning his wisdom and strength."

Clive found this difficult to comply with, but the woman helped him with questions. Suddenly she broke off, and leaving her perch went across to a table on which stood a fat-bellied flagon and several glasses. She poured out a thick yellow liquid and carrying the two glasses gave them to her guests.

"This wine is older even than I," she said, smiling down at Clive. "It will warm the heart and enchant the senses."

She did not drink herself but returned to her place on the table, where she watched Clive sip the liquor and cough a little at its strength. He had just put the glass down on to a nearby table when, from somewhere below, came the sound of a woman's voice raised in shrill protest. Shahmeeran turned her head sharply and listened. The voice drew nearer and shriller until it broke off in a sharp scream, followed by the noise of some heavy person coming up the stairs.

Shahmeeran got off the table and stood facing the door as a huge man wearing Pathan clothes appeared and clung with great hairy hands to the doorposts. His large expanse of face with a thick, red beard, and small, deepset greenish eyes, beamed aimiably at the woman, who stood rigid. The intruder then smiled, showing a set of broken, discoloured teeth.

"Violator of All the Decencies, it is you, Hassain Ali," hissed Shahmeeran in Urdu, her voice so cold and harsh that it made Clive shiver. "How dare you intrude upon me thus? Go. Do not return until the head is clear. Then I will tell you what lies in my mind concerning such conduct."

"O Sun of Love. O Lasting Fervour," boomed the man, grinning and swaying, the green pugri slipping more and more

to one side on his oiled hair. "My longing for you was such that desire would not be denied. Your female ape below denied me entrance."

"Go." Shahmeeran spat out the word.

The Afghan, who was very drunk, smiled again and coming into the room his gaze passed beyond the woman to the two men on the divan. He belched heavily as he waved a forefinger at Shahmeeran.

"By Allah the One, you have visitors, O Pearl. So great is your charm that a sahib comes to seek your favours." The man leered. "A young sahib. A handsome sahib. I am now as nothing in your eyes."

These remarks were too much for Shahmeeran's self control. Her face became distorted with rage, and darting forward she dug her hands into the great red beard as she abused the Afghan.

"Foulness! Drunken son of a noseless mother! Midan Scum!" she cried tearing at the wire-like hair. "I will have you beaten for those words. You shall be bastinardoed until you howl for mercy."

Hassain Ali staggered and bellowed with pain as portions of his beard began to part from his face. Lifting his hands he tried to disentangle the clawing fingers. Clive had sat upright staring at the scene in breathless astonishment, while Rugbar had begun by being much amused, but now realized it was time to intervene. Slipping off the divan he managed to separate the couple. With heaving breasts Shahmeeran moved away while Hassain Ali received a push in the chest from Rugbar that sent him staggering backwards in a ludicrous manner. Meeting the far edge of the divan he swayed for a moment like a sapling in high wind and then collapsed among the cushions, where he lay on his side. For a long moment the scene held, until a servant, with disordered hair and streaming eyes, ran into the room.

"The fault was not mine," she wailed, her wrinkled old face puckered by distress. "I strove to hold him, but he struck me to the ground."

Shahmeeran nodded without looking round and then waved the woman away. Clive, having got to his feet, glanced across at Rugbar who caught his eye and smiled. Both men then watched Shahmeeran who had recovered her self-control and was considering how to deal with the situation. Her face was calm, but there was an unpleasant light in her eyes. She turned suddenly to Clive.

"I am sorry for this, my friend," she said slowly in English." He has drunk much wine. He is like a beast. He shall be punished."

Clive said nothing, but wondered what form it would take. Shahmeeran then made up her mind and quickly left the room. As soon as she had gone Rugbar came across and stood close to Clive and they both stared down at the snoring Afghan.

"Good Lord, what a scene," exclaimed Clive. "Who is he?"

"Ask the gods. I do not know. He is too heavy for us to carry down the stairs. He must lie where he is."

"Shall we go when she comes back?"

"No. We will wait and see what will happen. She knows how to handle men; even men fuddled with wine as he is." Rugbar held up a hand. "Be quiet. She comes."

Shahmeeran came into the room again and in her hand was a glass phial in which was an opalescent liquid.

"Lift him so this may be poured down his vile throat," she ordered as she went to the divan.

The two men heaved the Afghan into a semi-sitting position, and the woman pushed the neck of the phial into his mouth. Much of the liquid, however, dribbled down into the beard. Shahmeeran cursed and then lifted the phial and poured the contents fully into Hassain Ali's mouth, with the result she partly choked him.

"Let him lie," she said straightening herself. "The potion acts swiftly."

The three now stood in a group beside the left window.

"Who is he?" asked Rugbar, as Shahmeeran went across and helped herself to a glass of brandy.

"He is out of the Northern Passes," she replied returning to the window.

"He rides his faith on a light rein," said Rugbar grinning.

"Hairy, lustful, and a strong-scented Shaitan," said Shahmeeran scornfully. "See. Already he stirs. The potion clears the fumes of wines even as the hot sun morning mists. It is in my mind he was drugged as well as drunk."

The Afghan grunted, rolled over on to his back and then slowly dragged himself into a sitting position. He rubbed his eyes and mouth and stared about the room in a bemused manner. He then saw the group beside the window, and after regarding each in turn fixed his bloodshot eyes on Shahmeeran.

"Shahmeeran," he muttered. "What happens? My mouth is as hot and dry as Attock Fort in Summer."

"You ask what happens," replied Shahmeeran. "It is fortunate my friend you were drugged as well as drunk or else a dagger should have washed away the insults rather than hairs from your beard."

"Insults?" he echoed thickly. "What befell? My mind is as empty as a dry water-skin."

Noticing his pugri lying beside him he hastily snatched it up, and after rewinding it on his disordered hair, tried with fingers to straighten out the tangles in his beard. The group watched him in silence.

"Why are you in Delhi who should be in Herat?" demanded Shahmeeran suddenly.

Hassain Ali licked his lips and grinned boyishly. The potion was working quickly and he was fast returning to normal.

"I was drawn south by the remembrance of your exquisite fragrance, O Love of the Ages."

The woman frowned and tossed her little head.

"Speak straight," she ordered. "Your flatteries are as heavy as the buffalo, your brother."

"It is true. I should lie in Herat, but He who Limps in Kabul is now an unfriend of mine." The Afghan hesitated and glanced at Rugbar and Clive.

Shahmeeran saw this and waved a hand impatiently.

"Continue," she ordered. "He is Rugbar Chand, son of Bhai Chand, and the sahib understands no Urdu. These walls have no ears as you know well."

"As the Exciter of Passion says." Hassain Ali shrugged his huge shoulders. "In the matter of the second son and his mother, the letter did not reach him in Kabul. He who Limps has turned his face from me and his heart is of stone. He will listen to no reason."

Shahmeeran nodded, her face suddenly strained and anxious.

"Who carried the letter?"

"Pila."

"Where is he now?"

The Afghan again shrugged his shoulders.

"The fool did not pass further north than Delhi. Thus says Bag Ram."

The woman drew in her breath sharply and compressed her lips.

"Bag Ram is a commodity on which money is lost. It is in my mind that, because of him, our men lie in alleys with daggers in their backs."

"Perhaps. But even you, Shahmeeran, say he is useful. I come from the house in the Weavers Ward. There lay Bogra's man."

"Bogra's man." Shahmeeran repeated the words fiercely. "What does he here in Delhi?"

"Bag Ram says he haunts the cantonments and is sure he shadows a sahib."

At the sound of the Rajah of Bogra's name Clive had started, and the woman instantly noted the fact. She turned to him.

"The Rajah of Bogra is known to you?" she enquired.

"I saw him in Maddabad, but I don't know him," answered Clive. "He was the maharajah's guest."

Shahmeeran nodded and then turned to Hassain Ali again and reverted to Urdu.

"There is the making of some foul mystery in this," she declared. "Did you drink wine with him?"

"Yes, and the Son of Eblis drugged it."

For several minutes there was silence, and then the woman appeared to speak her thoughts aloud.

"Bogra is as untrustworthy as a king cobra. Why did he go to Alangir? They do not love each other, those two. She who wrote the letter is Bogra's brother's wife's sister, who also hates him." Shahmeeran paused before continuing. "The matter of the sahib shall be looked into. Doubtless it is but a plan to cloud the truth of another matter, Hassain Ali. Why else should he drug you?"

The Afghan had got to his feet. A sheepish grin on his face, he hitched up his broad belt and belched heavily.

"That concerned a thing which lies only between he and I. He is as foolish as a hen to try to drug me." The man thumped his chest. "Me, whom six men cannot hold. Had he doubled the measure I would still have thrust him aside."

"So he is a Pathan also." Shahmeeran laughed sardonically. "Even so you snored like a fattened swine on that divan, my friend. You still had wit enough to find your way to me. That was wise, although I first thought you drunk alone." She turned quickly to Rugbar. "You have my leave to go. It is sad it must be so, but he and I have matters for our ears alone." She then held out a hand to Clive, who took it. "Good-bye," she said smiling. "I am certain the threads of our destinies cross and that you will come again. Why, I do not yet know."

When they reached the dark street they walked down it towards the Chandni Chowk where the car was waiting.

"I'm still a bit bewildered, Rugbar," said Clive as they got into the car and he slammed the door. "What was it all about? What did she and that fellow talk about? I only understood the rajah's name."

Rugbar rubbed his chin and glanced somewhat apologetically at his companion.

"It was very confidential and I must not talk about it to anyone, not even my father."

"Oh, I see," said Clive quickly. "But how did the Rajah of Bogra come into it. I thought he looked a dangerous fellow when I saw him in Maddashah."

"Yes, he is a dangerous, bad man. One of his spies is in Delhi and Hassain Ali says he drugged him."

"Why?"

Rugbar shook his head, and laughing self-consciously changed the subject by enquiring what Clive thought of Shahmeeran. Clive gave his impressions and then, glancing at his wrist watch as they passed a street lamp, saw it was still early.

"I say, it's too soon to go back yet," he said. "Can't we do something else? I don't feel like going to bed, and the hotel is sure to be dead now."

Rugbar agreed and leaning forward told the driver to pull up close to the curb. The subject was then discussed. It was too late to go to a cinema; they could not walk about in the more out-of-the-way bazaars because Clive's clothes would cause undue attention, and finally, it was too dark a night for a drive out on to the Delhi Plain. It was beginning to appear that the best that could be done was to return to Palm House for a drink and a talk, when suddenly Rugbar smiled and nodded as an idea occurred to him.

"Would you like to go to a Turkish bath?" he suggested. "There is one not far away from here. It would be a fresh experience for you to see an Indian one."

Clive at once agreed the idea was an excellent one.

"I've never had a Turkish bath so you'll have to show me what to do, Rugbar."

The Indian, who had spoken without due consideration, now hesitated and became doubtful as to the wisdom of the visit.

"I understand it is not a very nice place," he said slowly. "I have not been there, but my friends have told me about it."

"All the better. I'm out for something unusual. Come on. Let's go now."

Directions were given to the driver, who drove ahead for some distance and then turned off right behind the Great Mosque, and on past the Ivory Palace to swing into a side street. Suddenly the roadway became too narrow to take the car, and so Rugbar and Clive got out and walked. They turned down into an alley where Rugbar struck matches as he examined several wooden doors. He came to one which had Urdu script painted in yellow on one of the panels.

"Here we are," he announced soberly. "Do you still wish to go in?"

"Yes, of course."

Rugbar shrugged his shoulders and rapped sharply on the door. A brief pause followed before it was opened by a good-looking youth wearing only a damp, Isabella-coloured loin cloth who bade them enter. He stared in astonishment at Clive before leading the way down a passage which opened into a small, barely furnished room. Clive wrinkled his nose at the close atmosphere and smell of cheap soap. There was also a reek of damp clothes and oft-scrubbed wood.

The attendant, unable to keep his eyes from Clive, indicated two of many small, stout boxes, which Rugbar explained were for securing their watches, money, and other valuables. The bath charges were paid and when the boxes were locked and the curious keys handed over, the young man led the way down more corridors to a large, central underground room from which led off smaller ones. Cubicles lined the walls and there bathers removed their clothes.

"I say, Rugbar," called Clive from his cubicle. "Do we go about naked, or what? I don't see any towels or anything."

"Yes, we do. You see Indians wear loin cloths, but as we do not we have to go without," answered Rugbar laughing. "There are no women down here."

Having undressed more swiftly he came into Clive's cubicle and stood watching near the door. Clive glanced admiringly at his friend's finely moulded body, which was a golden brown, with firm, rounded limbs, and a hairless torso. He looked at his own white skin and grinned.

"I wish I'd got your colour, Rugbar," he said. "You look just as if you had had a good bout of tanning. I shall have to do a bit of sun-bathing myself. I did some on the ship coming out, but it seems to have worn off. By the way what did you mean just now when you said there were no women down here? Are there some upstairs?"

Rugbar nodded and chuckled.

"I am told there are rooms above this. You cannot say you were not warned. Come along."

The sweating process began in small rooms of varying high temperatures and except for the attendants there were no other bathers. News, however, that a sahib was present spread rapidly with the result naked youths came and went as they peeped with wide, curious eyes at the unusual spectacle.

"What happens now?" enquired Clive, who had sweated so profusely that he felt he had no further moisture left in him.

"We shall be washed and then massaged."

Rugbar clapped his hands and at once two assistants appeared and led them to a room in which were white marble slabs raised well off the floor. Here Clive was expertly handled and washed in the manner of a mother dealing with a small son. This completed, the massage began and he was rubbed, punched, knuckled, and kneaded, until he felt as if his body no longer belonged to him. His youth was merry-faced and chattered continuously in Urdu.

"What's he saying?" called Clive to Rugbar nearby.

His friend laughed and hesitated.

"He is paying you flowery compliments."

"What sort?"

"He compares your body to a newly opened lily."

"Good Lord, does he!" Clive was embarrassed. "What else?"

"Lots of other things."

"What sort of things?"

"He has called you a prince, a heaven born, and says you are an exciter of passion."

"Gosh!" Clive wriggled on his slab and stared up at the youth who was still smiling and chattering.

"What's he saying now?"

Rugbar, however, had become convulsed with mirth and did not reply at once.

"He is telling you that upstairs there are experiences of dream-like bliss awaiting you. The women are all pearls and the men the best looking in the north."

"Oh, I see. So this really is a brothel as well as a bath?"

"Yes, but we are not forced to partake of anything but the bath."

The conversation was broken off at this point by a final bout of massage. When they were back in their cubicles and were dressing, Rugbar came into Clive's buttoning up a fine, linen shirt.

"Shall we go upstairs and see what happens there?" he suggested, smiling broadly.

Clive nodded as he pulled on his socks.

"We might as well. Having come so far let's do the thing properly. But I won't stay long."

"All right. I am glad. We will remain a few minutes and then you can come home with me and have some drinks. You must be thirsty. How are you feeling?"

"Grand, thanks. That massage certainly bucks you up a hell of a lot. I feel I could knock a house down."

"Good. It is an art your people do not understand."

Rugbar returned to his dressing and in due course they were taken up several flights of stairs into a large, low room brightly lighted, and littered with heavy, Victorian furniture upholstered in red plush. Pausing on the threshold Clive gasped, partly from astonishment, and partly from a wave of hot air drenched with scent.

Madam, an elderly Eurasian, with an ample bosom, and dressed in a bright blue, tight-fitting dress and a cream sari draped over her grey hair, came forward beaming. She waved towards two gilt chairs placed side by side facing the far end of the room. The woman then clapped her hands and a curtain was wrenched aside and a bevy of naked women rushed into the room, chattering and twittering like a rowdiness of sparrows. With them came several youths wearing small loin cloths. In addition to these, attendants from the baths below slipped into the room to watch the scene. The stench of scent, warm bodies, and rank tobacco smoke, became almost more than Clive could bear.

The women, of all ages, promptly glided, posed, and swayed to and fro before the visitors. Some smiled coyly, others glanced up sideways from under lowered eyelids, and a few indulged in mildly suggestive movements. The men stood in a group to one side and took no active part in the display.

When writing to Colonel Herbert the next day Clive attempted to describe the scene.

'——. *It was really extraordinary. Rugbar Chand and I sat on those chairs and I did not know where to look, or what to do. Rugbar did not appear a bit embarrassed, but talked to madam when he was not laughing at the expression on my face. The girls were truly awful, and if I had been on a desert island I could not have been attracted by them.*

'*I stuck it as long as I could and then suggested to Rugbar that we left. He nodded and after saying something to madam we got*

to our feet. As soon as it became known we were leaving a small riot took place. The girls surrounded me and actually fought among themselves to claim me. The men joined in as well, and I began to get a bit scared. What with the noise and heat, and horrible smells, it was frightful. Madam tried to restore order by slapping hard whatever portion of bare flesh she could reach, but it had little effect. Suddenly, however, the commotion died away when a tall, dark-skinned man wearing a pugri like those in your state, came into the room. The crowd backed against the walls and stared at him in a frightened sort of way as he strode towards us. He said something to madam and she turned to Rugbar, who replied angrily. I asked Rugbar afterwards what had been said and he replied the man had asked what a sahib was doing in the house, and he, Rugbar, replied it was none of his business. We then rushed out of the house.

'When the front door was flung open by Rugbar four men were standing just outside. When they saw us they jumped like startled deer. I thought for a moment they were going to attack us, but they seemed so surprised they could not make up their minds what to do. We got back to the car all right and R, who seemed excited and upset, told the driver to drive like hell. Naturally I asked what was the matter and he said he had seen the tall man before, because he had been standing near the car when we had come out of Shahmeeran's house earlier in the evening. Apart from saying he thought he was a bad fellow he would not say anything more. I must say it was an experience I shall not forget in a hurry. ——'

The two friends drove back to Palm House and it was very late when Clive eventually got back to his hotel.

CHAPTER V

THE Rajah of Bogra left the palace in Maddashah shortly after Clive's departure for Delhi. Seated alone in his huge saloon car, with its silver fittings and vast headlamps, he was driven across country on the long journey back to his capital, Lingam, lying well to the south.

His mood was a black one, almost as black as his evil self. Things had not gone well during his visit to Alangir. His host had not treated him with all the respect he considered his due, although of inferior rank ; he had objected to the cheerful, free, and foreign atmosphere of the palace ; and, finally, there had been the deadly insult from the Englishman at the club on the

previous night. The insult was something tangible which he could regard almost dispassionately. It would have to be wiped out, but the matter was not pressing and could be given ample consideration as to the form the revenge would take.

When the rajah had returned to the palace from the club, his staff, acting upon instructions, soon learned much about the Englishman. Clive's future plans, temperament, social standing, together with a host of apparently insignificant details had been studied by the rajah. In the old days, as a matter of course, Clive would have been kidnapped, tortured and murdered, but now the case would have to be handled with the greatest care and secrecy. He was fully aware that the Government of India actively disapproved of him and was considering his displacement as ruler of the state. A recent communication signed by a very high personage had broadly hinted that if he did not mend his ways he must face the consequences.

There was one promising detail among those he had learned concerning Clive's future plans. It was that he was going north to Peshawar. If his proposed victim were lured into the back alleys of Peshawar City he could be dealt with without any shadow of suspicion falling upon Bogra. In old Peshawar City it was well known that men of all races disappeared and left no trace.

The small city of Lingam clustered about the base of a vast mound of rock which formed part of a spur jutting out from a line of low hills rising out of a highly cultivated plain. The top of the rock had been roughly levelled, and on it built the rambling fortress-palace. A road wound up to the massive double gateway which led to the lower, main courtyard. Surrounding this yard buildings rose and fell according to rock levels. There was the glorious zenana gateway on the right, rambling buildings on all sides, in which were latticed windows, and tiny balconies clinging like swallow's nests high up near the roofs. Many flights of steps led to other courtyards, passages, and open-fronted halls. In the left-hand corner of the main yard was a flight of steps leading down to dungeons carved out of the rock beneath the kitchens.

The car was seen from the walls some time before, and in consequence the palace was buzzing with activity when the ruler arrived. Officials crowded near, but not too near the saloon, as it drew up, and from the marble trellis work high up in the zenana gateway, women's voices could be heard. The rajah stepped out, and, after a swift glance at the courtiers, went

to his apartments. When he had bathed, changed his clothes, and eaten, he did some state work before going to the zenana.

The following day he sent for his diwan, an elderly, grave and dignified minister with long and faithful service.

"I pray that the Favoured of Krishna is in good health," said the old man, salaaming deeply as he came into the prince's inner room.

"My health is of the best," replied his master, turning in his chair and staring at his minister with dark, smouldering eyes.

The diwan knew this look and it generally boded ill for someone. He wondered what had taken place at Maddabad. The matter which had occasioned the visit had been a delicate one, liable to go much awry. Had it done so? He tried to read his prince's thoughts from his face. He had been against the visit, but he knew the danger of attempting to thwart even the lightest wish of this ruler.

The Rajah of Bogra then spoke. He spoke for a long time, and ended with detailed instructions. The minister's wrinkled face, with its thin goat-like beard, grew more and more troubled as he listened. The matter did not deal with a recent court intrigue, but concerned an Englishman. His surprise became fear, and fear something like terror. So shocked was he that he protested mildly.

"My lord, my lord! If this were discovered there would indeed be grave trouble," he quavered, his claw-like hands writhing together in agitation.

"Old man, it will be your duty to oversee the matter, a matter to be handled with much care. Remember there is one who covets your place." Bogra spoke softly, and the diwan understood.

"Who shall be sent, my lord?"

"Alam Beg shall do the work. He is to be trusted and is not without cunning. Send him to me."

The diwan departed leaving his master to turn his thoughts to Peter Willis, his resident, with whom he was on worse terms than usual.

Peter Willis was a thin, small man, with a lined face and leathery skin, and a pair of blue, angry eyes. A man of forceful opinions, and no respector of persons, he had known for some years he would never rise very far in his service. He sometimes wrote explosive reports liberally garnished with unpalatable truths, and these did not endear him to his superiors.

When the post of resident to Bogra State fell vacant the government found difficulty in getting a suitable man to fill it, it being politely but firmly refused by all to whom it was offered. In the end it was suggested to Peter Willis that he had better take the post because he was not likely to be offered another. He shrugged his shoulders and accepted; he had children at home to educate, and had only recently finished paying off debts contracted earlier in his service. When the news was broken to Amy Willis she was filled with the gravest misgivings and insisted that all their servants must be imported from elsewhere in India. This was done, but in spite of it she spent much time inspecting food and water; she did not wish either her husband, or herself, to die painfully in the night. Being an imaginative woman she went as far as to buy a stomach pump and learn how to use it, but she did not tell her husband.

Nothing particularly outrageous had occurred during the resident's two years of office until a few weeks previously, just before Bogra had gone to visit Maddabad. Peter Willis, who treated the ruler with exaggerated politeness, had grown to regard him as he would a semi-tamed wild animal; you made a fuss of it but were always closely on your guard. Bogra, on the other hand, blamed his resident for the unfortunate attitude of the supreme government towards him. He maintained that what went on inside the palace was his business alone, and when punishments had to be carried out there was no reason whatsoever why they should not be made amusing; punishment for punishment's sake was dull and sometimes must be made diverting.

The first sign of trouble had arisen over the matter of a distant relation of Bogra's, a youth, Dass Ram, who had dared to violate the palace zenana and seduce one of its most attractive inmates. On discovery, Ram Dass had escaped with his mother's aid, and fleeing north taken refuge in Kabul, where he considered himself safe from vengeance. The scandal had become common knowledge in the palace and it was accepted as a matter of course that the offender would be run down and murdered. Bogra had given orders to this effect and two men left the state to carry them out, but the affair had suddenly taken an awkward turn, and, in consequence, was causing the rajah some concern.

Ram Dass's mother, who lived in the palace, was of Persian descent and had powerful relations in Kabul, to whom her son had fled. It was she who had written the letter referred to by Hassain Ali in Shahmeeran's reception room. Pila, the bearer of this letter to a high official in Kabul, had been waylaid in

Delhi for another reason. The letter was found on him and promptly sent to Bogra, who read it and learned the part Ram Dass's mother had played in the escape, and also what she thought of him and his general conduct.

The official in Kabul, known as 'He who limps,' notified by telegraph of what had happened, called upon Hassain Ali to regain possession of the letter before it was too late. The Afghan, however, had failed, and, in addition, Bogra had learned that Shahmeeran was interesting herself in the matter. It was this knowledge that caused him to refrain from having Ram Dass's mother quietly strangled. Although consumed with thwarted rage he knew Shahmeeran was too dangerous to be lightly treated. It was for this reason his agent in Delhi had attempted to fuddle Hassain Ali and so learn from him Shahmeeran's real views.

The girl seduced by Ram Dass had been disposed of at once, and when Peter Willis, who was aware of what had taken place, enquired concerning her welfare he had been told that unfortunately the girl had died of belly pains, doubtless caused by eating too many unripe mangoes.

Such was the state of affairs when Bogra arranged his last shooting party of the season on a favourite stretch of water some miles from Lingam. The seventeen acres of water was small, but well stocked, and lay in a shallow fold of the ground. This sloped downwards to the north, and as a result much water was lost by sepage through an embankment, which was neither high enough, nor wide enough.

On the western bank, set in groves of trees and flowering shrubs, were once pleasant gardens in which stood numerous buildings, used as a shooting lodge by past princes who found the spot cool and refreshing after the barren heat of the palace. The rooms were still furnished, but smelled of damp and long neglect.

Bogra had no use for gardens or beauty, and only visited the place for a few hours, but it was then that the small durbar hall on the lake-side came to life again. The terrace, with its marble balustrade, was thronged with courtiers and officials who idled the time away until the shooting parties should return for refreshments.

The party was a small one on this occasion. It included the resident and his wife, and some of the younger courtiers who owned English-made guns. The invitation had included Peter Willis and his wife as a matter of course. Had the invitation

not been given, or had been refused by the resident, gossip would have ensued, a state of affairs neither side wanted.

The sun was setting and the air golden across the tree tops when the party gathered on the terrace. Smoke drifted lazily from cooking fires in a nearby village, and flocks of parrots hurtled overhead on their way home to roost, while the still water was stippled by clear shades of yellow, merging into browns and purples. The sport had been good and the rajah's mood was temporarily as near to being a pleasant one as was possible with him. He stood with one hand resting on the balustrade as he talked to Peter Willis. Mrs. Willis was in the rear chatting to the finance minister, a portly man with an active sense of humour.

Peter Willis knew his companion was aware of the part he had played in the recent scandal, and because of this he was pleasantly surprised by the rajah's amiability. When Bogra was annoyed he clearly showed it and so this agreeable mood was unlikely to be a ruse to put him off his guard ; this prince was too crude for subtleties of this kind.

Peter Willis had been told that the government, acting on his report, had sent a strongly worded letter and he reasoned from this that Bogra would be unwilling to do anything drastic where he was concerned. With this in his mind he accepted a whisky and soda, in spite of a warning glance from his wife. He drank from his glass and turned.

"If you raised that embankment you would be able to use this water for most of the hot weather, Your Highness," he observed in Urdu, pointing to the dam on their right. "I have looked at it carefully and I am sure much water goes that way."

Bogra nodded and fingered his drooping moustache.

"The thought is a good one," he said slowly. "How high should it be ?"

The resident shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps twice as high as it is now, but greater width is of more importance."

Again Bogra nodded, and neither man spoke for several moments.

"Do you think it should be made as high as a man ?"

"Yes, but not a tall man, Your Highness. That would be too much."

The rajah turned his head, looked at his companion and laughed. It was a rasping, unpleasant laugh and showed his strong, white teeth.

"It is strange, my friend, that you an Englishman should have spoken thus. It has put a thought into my mind. A most excellent thought and is an answer I was seeking."

He turned away leaving the resident mildly puzzled.

"What were you two talking about?" enquired Mrs. Willis as they drove homeward half an hour later. "He actually laughed. I was surprised."

"Oh, nothing much. I merely suggested if he raised that dam a bit he'd get more water during the summer."

"And then?"

"He said he thought it was a good plan and ended up by saying I'd given him some idea or other."

"Some new devilry, I expect," said Amy Willis bitterly. Her thoughts turned to another topic. "The mail should have come in by the time we get back. I wonder if Roger has written? If he hasn't you should write to the headmaster and tell him he must see that he does each week."

Her husband nodded and grinned.

"Poor old Roger. How he does hate letter writing."

"Speaking of letters," continued Mrs. Willis, "you did tell me they had sent a stiff letter to Bogra. I should have thought he would have been furious with you. He didn't seem to be."

"So should I. But there, his mind is as crooked as a snake in a hurry."

"I saw you take a drink. Was that wise, Peter?"

"Well I thought I might, just for once in a while. He's hardly likely to drop anything into it just now after having had that snorter from Delhi."

Mrs. Willis sighed and shivered slightly.

"Oh Peter, how I long to be clear of all this. Think of it. We've got another two years to run before your full pension is due. I really think I'll go home next year."

"Yes, do." Peter Willis put out a hand and squeezed one of his wife's. "You know I've said that for months."

"But I should worry myself sick leaving you here alone. You'd be sure to do something silly, like taking more drinks, or something of that sort, and then where should I be? I couldn't educate the children on a widow's pension, even if they gave me one."

Her husband told her not to be morbid and silly, and for some time they drove in silence.

"I forgot to tell you, Peter. Before we came out this morning I got a note from Mary Herbert. They have had a young man

from your part of the world staying with them," announced Mrs. Willis suddenly. She searched in her bag and producing a letter, opened it and studied it for a moment. "His name is Clive Penn. Do you know him? Mary says he comes from somewhere near Maidstone."

"No. Never met him, although the name seems a bit familiar. What else did she say?"

"Not very much. They had a lovely time at home." She paused and read a further portion of the letter. "Oh yes. She says the maharajah has four English girls staying in the palace."

"Oh, has he?" Peter Willis laughed. "I wonder what Bogra thought of that? Let's hope he doesn't do the same here. That would put the lid on it."

"Oh Peter, how awful," cried his wife, aghast. "Do you think he might? You'd have to stop it."

"He might. This craze for modern innovations is very catching."

Two days later the resident returned home from his office for lunch and broke the news to his wife that Bogra was seriously thinking of installing electricity in the palace.

"Is he really?" she cried amazed. "That is being modern with a vengeance."

"Yes, it is. I expect he got the idea from Maddabad. I shall watch the business with a good deal of interest."

Peter Willis was correct in his surmise that Bogra had appreciated the benefits of electricity during his stay with the Maharajah of Maddabad, and he had talked the matter over with his diwan.

"I have heard of this thing, my lord," said the minister gravely. "It is doubtless the work of many devils. My son in Calcutta has told me much care must be taken, because to touch this thing is to be as if stung by many hornets."

"That is true, but it will keep us cool. In Maddabad the fans made the air cold as if from off high snows. This thing shall be brought here at once. Go. Oversee the matter."

The diwan departed muttering into his beard. He decided to send an English-speaking secretary to Peter Willis to enquire how the matter should be dealt with. The resident explained, and as a result long telegrams were sent to a large engineering firm in Calcutta. A week later a young engineer with an assistant arrived in Lingam to give an estimate of cost and the length of time needed to instal a plant. He found it could be done quickly, but only at a considerable expense.

The diwan listened to the secretary who reported this to him. Grinning, he ordered the man to go to the rajah with the information. Bogra was in an evil mood when the nervous secretary was shown into his room. He listened for a few moments and then lost his temper.

"Son of fifty, foul, bastard hyenas," he snarled. "Am I a low-born that you babble to me like a flea-bitten ape? I care nothing for the cost." His voice became quieter. "But if all is not in readiness within one moon it is in my mind I know methods whereby laggards are chastened."

The secretary went back to the diwan, who sniggered when told of what had occurred.

"Doubtless you will be bastinadoed and perhaps lose your finger nails," he suggested, leering. "The Englishman who is to oversee the work has much arrogance."

The work was started, and for a few weeks life within the palace was agitated by the presence of scores of workmen who strayed into forbidden areas, banged continuously with large hammers, and laid traps for the feet of the unwary by leaving piles of material in unexpected places. Long and raging were the discussions when the engineer and his assistant stated they must enter the zenana if the work there were to be carried out. Voices rose to shrieks, and arguments sometimes ended in blows between workmen and officials.

Bogra became greatly interested in the new toy, and so absorbed did he become in the installation that Ram Dass and Clive Penn were temporarily forgotten.

In due course all was ready, the workmen departed, and comparative calm once again settled over the palace, disturbed only by the continual whirring of many fans.

Bogra was pleased, and even expressed his satisfaction, but he ordered the engineers to remain until such time as the palace officials in charge of the plant were thoroughly acquainted with its running. The engineer and his assistant were content to linger on because they were well paid, lodged in the state guest house, and their duties were light. They shot a good deal and spent much of their time with the Willises. At last it was decided that everyone knew his job and the engineers were told they might leave.

It was unfortunate, however, that three days before they were due to return to Calcutta the assistant should have suggested they made a short trip to a town in a neighbouring state on a visit to a brother who was employed on the local railway. The

elder man thought this a good idea, and without telling anyone, not even the Willises, of their plan the two men left one sultry evening.

In the early afternoon of the following day Bogra was dozing in his stuffy, ornate bedroom beneath a swiftly revolving ceiling fan. Without warning the fan began to slow down until it finally stopped, because, although the engine had been running, no current had been flowing into the batteries since the previous day and they had now run down. He was almost asleep and it was some minutes before the rajah realized what had happened. Heaving himself into a sitting position on the divan he began to sweat profusely. A hoarse yell brought attendants hurrying into the room where they stood looking up at the fan with scared, bewildered eyes.

"Apes! Scum of the Midan," howled Bogra. "Hasten and see what has befallen. If the fault is not mended at once you shall be beaten until you scream for mercy."

The servants fled, only to find the remainder of the palace in a turmoil. Every fan in every room had mysteriously ceased to function at the same moment, and all concerned who had a voice to raise raised it in loud and bitter complaint. The engine room, where several Indians were trying to locate the trouble, was besieged by an angry crowd who demanded that the fans instantly be made to work. Panting messengers hastened to find the engineers, only to return empty handed. In his room Bogra became more and more infuriated.

"Where are the accursed Englishmen?" he roared, moving up and down, fanning himself with whatever came to hand, as badly frightened officials came and went.

Secretaries, courtiers, officials, and servants, searched frantically for the missing engineers, and the butler in the guest house was dragged out and severely beaten because he was unable to say what had happened to his masters. The palace grew hotter, and Bogra was so angry that he was becoming dangerous.

The engine was running sweetly, the dynamo was purring, and yet no current would flow into the batteries. Switches, fuses, and suchlike appliances were minutely examined by frantic workmen but the secret remained undiscovered.

"It is as I thought," the diwan was heard to say, as he mopped a damp forehead. "This new thing is the work of devils. Devils breed other and more malignant devils."

Heads nodded gravely in agreement.

"Some black-hearted villain has doubtlessly cursed it," suggested a secretary. "The Englishmen know this and have fled."

Again there were numerous nods of agreement.

The following day the engineers returned from their expedition and the news became known at once in the palace. Instantly a storm broke over their astonished heads. Amused by the uproar they went to the palace and the engine room, where exhaustive enquiries were made.

"Everything seems in order," remarked the engineer to his companion after a prolonged examination. "What on earth can be the matter?"

The assistant shrugged his shoulders, but shortly afterwards had an inspiration. Going across to the dynamo he rubbed a finger across the armature and withdrew it dripping with oil.

"By all the saints," he exclaimed holding out his hand. "Look at this. Some damn fool has been oiling the armature."

Both men laughed and proceeded to point out forcibly to the Indians the foolishness of doing a thing of this kind. In a short time every fan had again sprung to life and sighs of relief were heard from every part of the palace.

The two Englishmen had put on their coats, washed their hands, and were about to return to the guest house when they found themselves surrounded by several of the palace guard. They were hustled out into the sunshine, across the main courtyard, and down the steps in the far corner. There followed a dark passage and several flights of slippery stone stairs. A small door was opened and the two indignant men were pushed inside and the door bolted behind them. The cell in which they found themselves was windowless, dark, small, and so hot as to be almost unbearable.

For twenty hours, without food or water, the engineers were held prisoners. When released and brought up into the bright sun of an afternoon they presented a remarkable spectacle. Both were on the verge of prostration from heat, their faces were white and haggard, and their clothes dishevelled. In this state they were led before Bogra, who was seated on a low divan from where he regarded them with dark disfavour. He spoke rapidly to a nearby secretary, who translated into English.

"His Highness says he hopes you both realize the great discomfort he endured through your carelessness. His Highness is still gravely displeased with you."

"Our carelessness!" exploded the engineer. "I like that. Tell His Highness it was one of his own fools who was responsible. It was nothing to do with us."

"I cannot do that," replied the secretary, smiling politely. "This would still further annoy His Highness, who might even return you from whence you have come."

The engineer shook with fury, and exhaustion, and ground his teeth.

"You can tell him he'll pay dearly for this outrage," he snarled.

Bogra looked down his nose and waved the men away. He had accurately guessed what his victims were feeling, and in return considered himself partly recompensed for the treatment he had received in Maddashah at the hands of an Englishman.

The engineers staggered back to the guest house where they soon felt better after food and drink, but they were no less furiously indignant. Peter Willis having heard rumours of what had occurred, went to the guest house and arrived as the engineer was having a bath.

"Is that you, sir?" he called, hearing the resident making enquiries from the butler.

"Yes. I've come over to hear what happened in the palace."

"Come in, sir, and I'll tell you what happened," cried the man violently.

Peter Willis pushed open the bathroom door and found the occupant standing upright in an oval tin bath. Soaping himself vigorously, and taking an occasional drink from a glass of whisky standing on a nearby table, he related his experiences with much dramatic gesture. The resident listened as he leaned against the doorpost. The affair tickled his sense of humour, but he assumed an air of gravity suitable to the occasion.

"Kept us both in the foul dungeon for nearly twenty four hours," hooted the engineer with increasing excitement. "That sort of thing isn't done in these days. This is modern India, and by all the gods and she saints I'll make him smart for it when I get back to Calcutta."

"You must have had an awful time," said Peter Willis sympathetically. "What a devil he is. Doesn't care for man or beast when he's roused, and you seem to have done that all right."

"But I tell you it wasn't our fault," cried the engineer, stepping out of the bath and catching up a towel.

"I know it wasn't, but if you had lived in this state for as long as I've done you'd realize this is far from being modern

India, and in many ways is very bad old India. What are you going to do?"

"We are leaving as soon as possible, and then things are going to happen, sir. Do you know I'm a junior partner in our firm, and I have been treated like this. I am going to sue him for heavy damages, that's what I'm going to do, and I'll move heaven and earth to see I get 'em."

"I suppose you want me to report the matter?"

"Yes please, sir. Why I'll write to the Viceroy himself if necessary. Our firm has got lots of standing in Calcutta, and the Chamber of Commerce will back me up."

"Well, I shouldn't write to Delhi, if I were you, young fellow. It wouldn't do any good. Besides Bogra is already in their bad books, and if it is going to be a court case the government cannot very well take sides until it is over."

CHAPTER VI

In Delhi Clive had been pursuaded to change his plans by Rugbar, who wanted to take him down to Jaipur and Udaipur, which he said should on no account be overlooked. Clive had intended to visit these places after his northern tour, but the fact that he would have his friend as a companion and guide was too good an opportunity to be missed.

On their return, Clive went back to the hotel for a few days before setting out for Peshawar and Kashmir. He was in the grounds sitting at one of the tables lining the swimming pool writing a long letter to Muriel Burdon, when a servant approached and said he was wanted on the telephone. Hurrying into the lounge he went into the telephone box, picked up the receiver and found it was Rugbar on the other end.

"I have just got a letter from Shahmeeran," he announced gravely. "She wants us to visit her this evening. Can you do that?"

Clive thought for a moment.

"Yes, I could manage it if I changed first. You see I'm dining out in New Delhi at eight-thirty, so we mustn't stop too long. What does she want us for?"

"I do not know, but she says she must talk with us. I will come at six o'clock."

When they arrived in Shahmeeran's reception room, Clive saw the divan had gone and in its place were a large pile of cushions, arm-rests and back-rests. Among them reclined the

woman under an electric ceiling-fan whose huge wooden blades turned lazily. Dressed in pale blue silk, with a cream sari draped over her hair, she had been studying some papers which she put down as her visitors entered.

"Greetings, O Exquisite Radiance," said Rugbar politely. "We hastened at your command."

"Command? Who am I to command sahibs?" she answered laughing. "I am honoured above all. Sit beside me and we will talk with open hearts on grave matters."

"Salaam Shahmeeran. I am happy to come," said Clive in Urdu, as they sat down on either side of the woman.

"Ho ho! You can now speak our language." She clapped her hands and laughed again. "That is good, very good. Is he your teacher?"

"Yes. On our journeyings he spent many hours so I can speak slowly."

"He is an apt pupil, Shahmeeran," observed Rugbar quickly. "His mind is sharp and clear, clearer than that of many of his race I have known."

"My heart is happy because of this thing. I knew it from his face." She smiled at Clive. "Doubtless you would know why I sent for you?"

Both men nodded, and the woman turned to Rugbar.

"It was because I have news, strange news. When you left this house in the last moon that lustful Pathan, Hassain Ali, and I spoke together. The next day he came again, this time carrying information that disturbed me. It is in your mind when you were here the Afghan spoke of Bogra's man shadowing a sahib. I had told Hassain Ali to discover if this were true and the sahib's name." Shahmeeran paused dramatically. "It was indeed true. The sahib is this one who sits with us. Is that not strange?"

"By all the gods, what does that mean?" cried Rugbar, thoroughly startled and alarmed.

Shahmeeran shrugged her shoulders and glanced at Clive, who was looking puzzled, having only partly understood the swift flow of Urdu.

"Tell him in his own language what I have said. And ask him if he knows the cause."

Rugbar did so, and the woman watched the astonishment grow on Clive's face.

"Following me," he cried, as his friend stopped. "What on earth for?"

Rugbar spread out his hands and shrugged as he turned to the woman.

"From his face you can see he knows nothing," he said sharply. "What manner of person is this Bogra's man? Is he tall and of an evil countenance?"

"The Afghan said he was tall and thin, but of his looks I did not make enquiry."

Rugbar nodded and then mentioned how, when he had left the house, he had seen such a man standing near the car, and also of the fellow's sudden appearance in the room at the Turkish bath.

"You took the sahib to that house; that den of infamy; that foul nest of vultures," cried Shahmeeran angrily. "You must have lost your senses."

Her companion grinned sheepishly and explained why they had gone to the place. The woman listened impatiently and then dismissed the subject with a wave of her hand. Looking at Clive, she spoke in English.

"The Rajah of Bogra is a bad man, an evil man," she said clearly. "You told me you did not know him. Did you speak truly?"

"Yes," exclaimed Clive hurriedly. "I saw him once in the club at Maddashah."

"You did not speak with him?"

"No. I don't think he even saw me. He was with the maharajah and kept looking at Colonel Herbert."

"Why should his agent dog your footsteps?"

"I don't know."

Shahmeeran clicked her small teeth together and heaved herself to her feet.

"There is the makings of a foul mystery here," she said grimly. "We will strive to see something of the pattern of your destiny, my friend. A black strand has become entangled into its tapestry. We must pluck it out."

She crossed the room and from a long, deeply carved wooden box took out a circular, flat, and highly polished piece of black stone with a green jade handle. It was about four inches in diameter and polished on both sides, and Clive watched her as she returned to her place. Taking both his hands, she placed the palms on either side of the disc so that they pressed tightly against it. Telling him to hold it so, she turned and spoke rapidly to Rugbar for several moments. She then drew the disc away and told him to breathe deeply on both sides of it. Smiling, he did

as he was told. Shahmeeran then took the disc and leaning back against the cushions stared intently at one side. Rugbar and Clive watched her in silence.

Suddenly the woman began to speak slowly in English.

"There is a room, a sahib's room. Sitting at a table is a woman who is small. Her eyes are dark and angry. She rises to her feet and speaks to a tall man. I think he is a priest. She goes away. The man now takes a letter from a black box. It is a long letter. He smiles."

"Yes, that is my father," exclaimed Clive. "He gave me a letter like that."

"Ahi, this is without gain," announced Shahmeeran impatiently. "That is the past. What I desire is the future."

She turned the disc over and again stared at it while Clive made a grimace at Rugbar, who held up a warning finger. There followed a long and pregnant silence, while Shahmeeran frowned and compressed her lips.

"Good. At last it clears," she said. "All is bold and clear. There is water, calm water shining in the sun. It is a lake. It rises, it sinks. Beside it is a man who lifts stone and is beaten with a whip by one who stands behind." She drew in her breath sharply and paused. "It has gone. Now I see the priest again. He walks before a coffin. Behind it is the small woman and a girl. The girl weeps. Ahi, again it changes, and how swiftly. Now it is a garden where the priest talks to the girl. He is warning her, but she will not listen. Now it fades and the clouds return." She dropped the disc into her lap and stared at Clive, her small head slightly on one side. "What have water, whips, and coffins to do with you, my friend?" she said slowly. "No, the coffin was not yours, I am certain, even as I am sure that Bogra plots against you. I would that we could have seen the reason."

"We must find the reason," cried Rugbar leaning forward. "Tell us about this rajah for whom you have no regard."

"He is a spawn of hell spewed from his mother's foul womb." Shahmeeran spoke quietly, but none the less forcibly. "Three times by his deeds he has crossed my path. The government knows his nature and yet does nothing." She then spoke of the Ram Dass case.

"Why do you concern yourself in this matter?" asked Rugbar as she paused. "What is this zenana-meddling fool to you, Light of the North?"

Shahmeeran half closed her eyes and entwined her fingers as she leaned back among the cushions.

"Do not seek to know too much, my friend," she said softly. " 'He who Limps' in Kabul is more than a friend to me. Bogra has made a new devilry, but this time he has set free a swarm of hornets about his evil head. I learned, when enquiring about this sahib, that he shut up two strange sahibs for many hours in a hot dungeon. When released they raised their voices in loud complaint, and take the matter to the courts. Already the newspapers make comment."

Clive had been mildly astonished by Shahmeeran's reading of his past and future, but it made little impression upon him because his upbringing had led him to consider such things as silly and vaguely unchristian. He sat back among the cushions while his companions discussed the possible consequences likely to arise from Bogra's latest deed. Turning to glance at Clive the woman saw him looking at his wrist watch. She broke off her conversation with Rugbar at once and got to her feet. Her visitors followed her example.

"Aho, I crave to know what lies before you, my friend," she said to Clive. "This mystery tantalizes me like a luscious fruit beyond my reach. If harm should come to you from Bogra I will make him wriggle in the dust like a half-dead snake." She held out a hand. "Good-bye, my friend. Remember what has been said. Send word if aid be needed and I will do what lies within my power. You have my leave to go."

Half an hour later Clive was being greeted by his host in a bungalow in New Delhi. Sir Ralph Burnes was an economic adviser to the government and a personal friend of the Herberts. A sandy-haired Scotsman with merry blue eyes, he was tall and heavily built.

"Ah, so here you are, young fellow," he boomed, as Clive was shown into the drawing room. "Found your way here all right? Have some sherry?"

Clive accepted a glass of pale sherry as Lady Burnes hurried into the room. She greeted her guest in a distracted manner and turned to her husband.

"We shall have to delay dinner, Ralph. The Temples have just rung up to say they can't get their car to start."

"That's all right, Ann. There is plenty of sherry and it will give young Peterson a chance to change in less of a hurry. I'll go and tell him now."

Sir Ralph left the room carrying his glass, while his wife stood with one hand resting on the mantelpiece and tapped on the rug with an impatient toe.

"Things do seem to happen all at once, don't they, especially when they are unpleasant ones?" she said plaintively to Clive, who agreed that they did. "Mr. Peterson turned up unexpectedly from Calcutta this evening, the cook has had an attack of colic, and the butler is preparing the meal. Goodness knows what it will be like, and the Temples always give one such lovely food. It is all very upsetting."

Lady Burnes swept across the room and helped herself to half a glass of sherry. Returning to her position near the fireplace she enquired after the Herberts, and then flung out disjointed questions as to what her guest thought of Delhi and India. She paid little attention to the answers, and then made a startling statement.

"Do you know, Mr. Penn, Robert Peterson, who has just arrived, has had a most extraordinary experience. I understand he was shut up for hours and hours in a hot dungeon by some rajah. I haven't heard all the details yet."

"What?" cried Clive, considerably startled. "Not by the Rajah of Bogra, was it? How very curious. I heard about it just before I arrived."

At this point Sir Ralph returned, and with him was the engineer who had installed the electric light plant in the palace at Lingam, having come to Delhi to report in person what had occurred in Bogra's palace. Sir Ralph, being an old friend of his mother's, he naturally stayed with him, as he had done in the past.

Lady Burnes introduced the two men. Peterson was older than Clive, but they liked each other at sight. The hostess then turned to her husband.

"Mr. Penn has been telling me that he has heard about Robert's experience, Ralph. Isn't that strange?"

"No, why should it be, seeing that all the newspapers have at least mentioned the business?" He glanced at Clive. "By the way, do you know this fellow, Bogra?"

"No sir. I merely saw him once in the club at Maddashah. But I must say I didn't care much for his looks."

Major and Mrs. Temple were now announced, and in due course the party went in to dinner, with Lady Burnes telling at some length of her domestic crisis. During the meal the conversation turned mainly upon Peterson's recent experience. When the topic was dying away for lack of fresh material and

comment, the engineer, who was seated opposite to Clive, leaned across and asked if he spoke the language.

"Just a little. I understand more than I can speak," answered Clive, smiling.

"Why I ask is because when we were waiting to be taken in to see the old devil in the palace two men were standing near me. I heard one say something to the other, who nodded as if his head would fall off. I've a pretty good memory. Tell me if you know what this means."

He spoke two sentences in Urdu, while everyone present listened. Clive asked him to repeat them slowly. This was done and Clive translated them word by word.

" 'If he another sahib brings then much trouble will be. This thing very bad is.' That's what I think it is, or something very like it."

"Thanks. I thought it was that." He turned to his host. "What do you make of it, sir?" he asked.

"Make of it, Robert? How should I know?" Sir Ralph shrugged his huge shoulders. "Sounds to me as if this precious rajah of yours was thinking of doing the dirty on some other fellow as well."

Lady Burnes now decided that it was time to change the conversation, but had any of the diners been watching the bearer, who was acting as butler, they would have seen a momentary gleam in his dark eyes as he listened to the talk between the two guests.

Two hours later Clive was driven back to his hotel. He was feeling mellow, having drunk excellent wine and listened to witty conversation, Major and Mrs. Temple being clever at guiding talk into interesting channels. He went straight to bed. Lying on the hot sheets, wearing only the lower half of his pyjamas, he watched the blades of the slowly revolving ceiling-fan. He ran over the events of the day and appreciated their violent contrasts. Shahmeeran, mysterious and fascinating, and thoroughly oriental, and the Burnes typically British. What a gulf separated the two. He wondered what Muriel would have thought of Shahmeeran. Had the woman been able to read his future? She certainly described his parents, but then, of course, that was some kind of thought-reading. She had been far less definite about the future, which seemed a jumble of disconnected events. It was curious, however, that this fellow Bogra should keep coming on to the scene. There couldn't possibly be any reason for his being shadowed. Perhaps Shahmeeran and Rugbar

were trying to scare him for some obscure reason? No, Rugbar would never do that, the fellow was much too decent; besides they were friends.

He turned from side to side growing increasingly disturbed. For a few minutes he felt as if some invisible net were being drawn about him. Shaking himself mentally, he wrenched his thoughts to the coming journey on the following day. In the north and Kashmir he would be hundreds of miles from Bogra, and Shahmeeran, and the rest of them. He had enjoyed his stay in Delhi, but it was time he broke away.

In the early afternoon the long, dusty mail-train drew into the platform at Peshawar Cantonments. Clive went direct to the pleasant hotel near the station, and as soon as he had settled in, used another of Colonel Herbert's letters of introduction. This was to Major Lake at Khyber House, who was the Political Officer for the Khyber District. He wrote a letter saying he had arrived, enclosed the introduction, and despatched the envelope by his bearer. He then went for a walk and found himself on the broad Mall, which runs from one end of the cantonments to the other. Turning left, he strolled along the path beside a broad line of tan edging both sides of the road. He admired the fine bungalows, set well back in splendid gardens, some of which blazed with flowers varying from roses to the humble forget-me-not. There were a few buildings which were clearly officers' messes and quarters, and bare when compared to the bungalows.

The traffic on the Mall was varied and interesting. A few riders trotted past on the tan, cars glided to and fro, and various men rode bicycles. A bullock cart lumbered along, and behind it were two camels regarding the world in general as though it were a bad smell. Clive came to a few shops and then the Peshawar Club, a long, rambling building set in spacious grounds. It was at this point through the trees that he caught a glimpse of the distant Himalayas. Moving down beside the club grounds the trees drew back and the country opened up as it swept across the Vale to the foothills, beyond which great snow-covered mountains reared up into a clear apple-green sky where chubby clouds floated. The snows were tinted pink and flame from the setting sun, and merged sharply into purples and blacks on the lower slopes. He was thrilled, and experienced an urgent desire to go closer to these giants.

Realizing it was becoming late he turned back, and at the hotel found a reply waiting from the Political Officer. It was a short

note asking him to be in the club bar at six-thirty that evening. Pleased by the promptness of the answer he bathed and changed into a fine, expensive saxon lounge suit, after having carefully chosen his shirt, tie, and socks. This was his first visit to a military cantonment and he meant to impress those he might meet during the evening.

No one paid any attention to him as he wandered into the club, but drifting into a large lounge, where women were sitting in deep chairs reading illustrated papers, or chatting in small groups, he became acutely aware that many pairs of feminine eyes were regarding him with frank interest. Retreating hastily he saw a pair of swing doors, pushed them open, and found himself in the famous Horse-shoe bar. The room was crowded with men of all ages and types, and the air blue with tobacco smoke.

Having no idea what Major Lake was like, he went to one of the fireplaces and stood watching the crowd lining the bar. Several men glanced in his direction, and then a medium-sized man, with a tanned face, humorous mouth, and greenish eyes, detached himself from a small group and came across.

"You're Penn, aren't you?" he said smiling.

"Yes sir. I'm waiting for Major Lake."

"That's me." The man held out his hand, as he summed up Clive with swift assurance born of long experience of all types of men. They shook hands. "So you are a friend of Colonel Herbert's. Grand chap, isn't he? Haven't seen him for years, but I heard he'd been home on leave. You must tell me about him, and Mary Herbert too. Come over and join the party."

The Political Officer led the way across to the bar.

"This is the fellow I mentioned, Overs," he said to a tall, studious looking man, with a drooping moustache. "Clive Penn, Colonel Overs." He then turned to two other men, one small, wiry and satanic, and the other obviously a young captain. "Charles Boyes and Captain Payne."

Clive shook hands with each in turn and then accepted the offer of a whisky and soda from Colonel Overs. The group, led by Major Lake, now made the usual enquiries about Clive's activities, where he had been, where he was going, and what he would do in Peshawar. Another round of drinks was ordered, but the colonel announced he must go, and drifted vaguely away. When out of earshot the Political Officer explained who he was.

"He commands a battalion of Gurkhas. A regular fire-eater. But you wouldn't think so to look at him, would you?"

Clive agreed he would not.

"His little yellow men worship him. What do you think his hobbies are? You'll never guess. Collecting stamps and breeding Siamese cats."

Everyone laughed at Clive's bewildered expression, and then Major Lake caught Captain Payne by the arm.

"This lad is just back from rather a nasty show up at Bijal across the border. Just managed to get away with your matrimonial prospects, didn't you, Jock?"

"Do you mean you have been in a fight?" enquired Clive quickly.

"Yes, sort of. A local tribe got a bit above themselves, you know, and we were sent up to damp their ardour. Unfortunately several of our fellows got surrounded and cut up. It was touch and go for a while."

Captain Payne proceeded to give lurid details that made Clive shudder. Charles Boyes, who was in the local government and also a secret agent on the political side, watched Clive's face and smiled grimly.

"Why, that's nothing to the yarns I could spin," he interrupted gruffly. "You haven't realized yet, Penn, that in this bit of India men are men, and the Pathan a big, bouncing devil lurking on our hillsides. Lots of fellows here in cantonments sleep with revolvers under their pillows. A few murdering robbers are always just outside the wire at night."

"Shut up, Charles," ordered Major Lake, turning to Clive. "Don't believe a word he says. He's always trying to make a newcomer's hair stand on end."

"But I've heard Peshawar is a pretty wicked spot," answered Clive laughing.

"Wicked. I'd say it was." Boyes drank deep from his glass. "It's got Kabul beaten by several lengths. Even you will agree to that, Lake."

"Yes, I suppose you're right, although I have never been in Kabul. By the way Penn, don't go down into the city alone. I'll get someone to go with you, if you want to have a look at it."

"Isn't it safe, sir?"

"In the main bazaars it is all right, but in the maze of side alleys you may well get a dagger in your back. The murderer would rob you and be across the border before we knew you were missing. It really isn't worth the risk. It doesn't often happen, but if it does there's the very devil to pay. The whole province is set by the ears, and I'm worked to death trying to trace the fellow 'what done it.' "

Examples were now given, but the conversation gradually changed to more normal things : a meet of the Peshawar Vale Hunt was discussed ; a regimental dance mentioned ; and a local engagement was the subject for facetious comment.

The evening wore on and before the party broke up Captain Payne turned to Clive.

"I think you told us you were on your way up to Kashmir ?" he said. "I wish to God I were. This place gets more and more foul as summer approaches."

"Yes, I shall go up when I leave here."

"Well, if you take my tip you'll go by way of Abbottabad and the Galis to Murree and take a car up from there."

"Galis. What are they ?"

His companion explained they were numerous tiny military cantonments used in the past by mountain batteries, on a road seven thousand feet up in the foothills.

"I love 'em," he continued enthusiastically. "Of course they are not a patch on Kashmir, but they've got a charm of their own, and not many civilians make the trip. Don't you think he should go that way, sir ?" he suggested to the Political Officer.

"Yes, I think it a good idea, Jock. The flowers on the hillsides should be a sight for tired eyes by now."

When Major Lake left the club Clive went with him, and in the office was made an honorary member during his stay.

"Come and have dinner with us tomorrow evening," suggested the Political Officer as they stood waiting for his car. "We've got a few people coming and my wife would be pleased if you would join us."

"Thanks very much, sir. I'd like to."

"Good. At seven forty-five, and don't bother to call first. We will take that as done, but I should write your name in the book at government house, if I were you."

"Yes I will, sir. Good night."

They shook hands, Major Lake got into his car, and Clive started to walk back to the hotel. He was feeling mellow and at peace with the world. He was going to like Peshawar. It had a different atmosphere from Delhi and the south, and he considered this as he strolled through the faintly scented night under a clear sky. It was an atmosphere laced with a vague sensation of excitement and uncertainty. Did robbers really lurk outside the barbed wire, which he was told surrounded the whole area ? He grinned to himself as he recalled the remarks made about Pathans in the club. All the bartenders were Pathans and yet

none looked in the least like a bloodthirsty ruffian. Some in fact were extremely good looking, and one had winked at him when he had caught his eye for a moment. What had that meant? He made a note to ask someone later on.

The following morning he was standing in the entrance hall of the hotel on his way to government house, when the Eurasian receptionist approached and enquired if he needed a car. He explained that one was waiting on the drive.

"Not just now," replied Clive. "Tell the fellow to come back after tiffin. He can then take me up the Khyber Pass, which I am going to see."

The man looked doubtful.

"But saar, that will give little time, saar. To see all the things plenty of time is needed, saar," he pointed out respectfully. "All misters must be backward over the barrier by setting of the sun. It is a government order, saar. The Khyber is a very bad place in the night."

"All right, I will go tomorrow morning."

"Thank you saar. You will take a tiffin basket?"

"Yes, I might as well and then I needn't hurry."

Clive walked to Khyber House that evening, and passing the policeman on duty at the gates went up a drive lined with standard roses. At the door he was received by a portly, grave butler and shown into a pleasant drawing-room. Mrs. Lake and her husband greeted him and he was introduced to a grizzled, elderly man, tall and thin, and wearing a monocle. Clive learned he was the English consul in Khandahar, down in Peshawar for consultation with the governor of the province.

The party was completed by the arrival of a brigadier and a Gunner colonel. Nothing unusual took place at dinner until after Mrs. Lake had departed, leaving the men to their port and cigars. The brigadier turned to the consul and the conversation took a new course.

"What do you think of the old scare cropping up again, Jude?" he asked. "I'd like to hear your views."

The consul cleared his throat, drank some of his port, and hesitated.

"You mean our friends in the north, I suppose?"

The brigadier nodded, and the Political Officer, guessing the consul was doubtful about Clive's presence, interrupted.

"Yes, do tell us your views," he said quickly. "Penn, I am sure, will keep his mouth shut, won't you?"

Clive hastened to assure his host that he would.

"Well, if you really want my opinion, and it's only my opinion remember, I think there is a good deal in it," said the consul slowly.

"So you think they've turned their heads towards India once more," observed the brigadier smiling. "Personally I don't think they would have a hope of forcing the passes. And what about the Afghans?"

"My dear sir, the passes have been forced a great many times in the past, and will be again. As for the Afghans, even if they did try to resist, which I very much doubt, they wouldn't have a hope. No, I believe if trouble did develop they'd throw in their hands at once, make terms, and then join in the looting of Delhi and the Punjab."

"Phew, do you really think so," exclaimed the gunner. "Where do we come in I'd like to know?"

"We should have our hands full, and the trouble wouldn't begin until they were."

"You mean another mutiny?" suggested Major Lake gravely.

"Yes, and it's coming all right. You know that, Lake, as well as I do, only this time it is going to be something a great deal worse. Congress is going all out. Consider us dealing with trouble like it was in Java, but all over India. How on earth could we defend the northern frontiers? It wouldn't be possible, and they know it as well as we do."

"What a sweet picture," cried the brigadier, and the table nodded agreement.

"Yes, and painted with blood and tears." The consul stubbed out the end of his cheroot. "There will be no one to blame but ourselves. We've asked for it and we are going to get it. Our policy in this country has been one of crass stupidity. The Germans were and are all we said they are, but they are no fools. I think fools can bring about as much misery in the world as brutes."

Clive had sat wide-eyed and amazed during the conversation.

"Do you really think all that, sir?" he gasped, leaning across the table. "I had no idea things were so bad."

"I mean every word of it, young fellow," replied the consul smiling. "You're typical of the folk at home. How many people really believed Hitler was planning what he was? Very few, and the same thing applies now. If I got up on some platform at home and said what I have this evening I should be howled down as a scare-monger, talking out of the back of my head."

"But can't something be done about it out here, sir?"

"No, I don't think so. It's too late. We shall have to face the music, and if I had a family I'd send them home at once. Now let's change the subject to something less disturbing. Have you been down to the city yet, Penn?"

"No sir, but I want to go very much."

"Yes, you'll find it interesting, but don't go alone."

"I know, sir. Major Lake told me not to."

"That's right. I am going down tomorrow morning and I'll take you if you like. I know most of the better sights."

"Thanks very much, sir, but tomorrow I've arranged to visit the Khyber Pass."

"Oh well, it can't be helped. Perhaps Lake will fix up something for you." The consul turned to his host and the conversation changed to a discussion on the local hunt, with which the consul hoped to have a day.

When Clive got to bed he found it difficult to sleep. The alarming possibilities opened up at dinner refused to be dismissed, in spite of assuring himself the situation had been exaggerated. He wondered why Rugbar had said nothing about it and, if things were so bad he must know something about them. He had once read some book about the Indian Mutiny, and a few of its grimmer passages came back to him. Surely that sort of thing wasn't going to happen again? And why didn't they talk about it at home? It was all very confusing and disturbing. The consul fellow had mentioned the passes. One of them must be the Khyber. That would make his visit the next day much more interesting, because he could study it from the angle of an advancing army.

The following morning at ten-thirty he was told the car was waiting. Leaving the hotel he approached a large, grey touring car standing on the drive. At the wheel was a tall Indian with a cap pulled well down over his forehead. Deciding to sit in front he got in and slammed the door. The car moved out of the grounds, and as it did so Clive stared hard at the driver, whose face seemed vaguely familiar.

They slid up the Mall, passed the club, and then turned out of cantonments on a tree-lined road which sloped down to a wide open plain, stoney and torn by dry watercourses. Beyond lay the dark brown hills with sharp peaks ripping a pale cobalt sky. On the far side they were stopped at the barrier dividing British India from Tribal Territory, where a policeman produced a fat book in which Clive was told to write his name, destination, and probable time of return.

Nothing had been said between the driver and his passenger, but when the pole across the road was raised and the car moved forward Clive turned and asked the man what the squat, solid building on the right was. The driver shook his head and Clive realized he could not speak English. After a few moments effort he managed to repeat the question in Urdu.

"That is Fort Jumrud," answered the man, still keeping his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

"What is that ?" enquired Clive, pointing to a square building on the left standing well back from the road.

"It is a serai."

It was clear that the driver had no intention of acting as a guide, so Clive shrugged his shoulders and sat well back as the car purred up the steadily rising road, which bit deeply into the hills. On a steep gradient they entered the beginning of the pass which rose up through a narrow valley seared with water-courses, draining the tumbled, barren hillsides. Round a sharp corner came Fort Shaghai, with its high walls under the shadow of a tremendous hillside.

Beyond the fort the road sloped downwards, and Clive saw the countryside on the left rolled away to a distant line of olive-green hills. The area seemed deserted, and except for a few camels, they had met no one on the road.

A few minutes later the car entered the bottom of a narrow gorge where the road wound continuously as it followed a torrent bed. Clive was fascinated by the barren strength of this gloomy land, so wrenched and convulsed that it was frightening. It was this he had come to see, and it seemed to him that this pass could be held against any force.

Without warning the hills drew back and the road emerged on to a small plain dotted with Afridi houses, each with its watch tower and high, blank walls. Clive looked at the charming little cantonment of Landi Kotal ; ate his lunch near the frontier, and then ordered the driver to return to Peshawar. On nearing the barrier at Jumrud he saw a large gathering of men collected outside the serai. Ordering the driver to stop, he got out and walked across to inspect the crowd. He saw it consisted of a horrifying mob of scallywags who were obviously tribesmen down from the hills. Tall, thin, undernourished, they were dark, very hairy, with hooked noses, and very wicked, red-rimmed eyes. They stood in groups, or squatted, as they regarded Clive with evil looks, looks thrown out sideways from half-closed eyes. It was now Clive forcibly realized that what

had been said to him in the club about the Pathan had not been exaggerated. Later he mentioned the incident to Major Lake, who laughed and explained that the tribesmen had gathered for a discussion with him on tribal politics.

"They really were a frightful looking crew," said Clive shuddering. "Are they all like that?"

"Most of them are. You see, when you live in the sort of country you saw in the pass, it's a case of every man for himself, and you've got to be really tough to stand the pace."

When he got back to the hotel Clive was leaving the car when the driver suddenly spoke to him in English.

"Would the sahib like to go to the city? I know it well. I could show many interesting things."

"I thought you couldn't speak English," exclaimed Clive, surprised and annoyed. "No, I don't want to go to the city with you."

The man smiled unpleasantly and shrugged his shoulders as Clive moved into the building. On passing the office door the receptionist greeted him.

"You enjoyed your car drive, saar?" he asked.

"Yes, it was all right, but I thought that taxi drivers sometimes acted as guides. That fellow hardly said a word and pretended he didn't speak English."

"Ah, he is a new man, saar. He is not known to us, but the motor car is a fine one. You will take it again, saar?" enquired the man, who had been well-tipped by the driver.

"I might," replied Clive shortly and moved away.

Two days passed before he visited the city with Charles Boyes, and Clive found him an amusing and instructive guide. They walked down the Mall, past Government House, turned right over the railway bridge and Clive learned from his companion something about the city. It seemed in its narrow lanes and alleys there lived the scum of the North-West Frontier Province, made up of thugs, gangsters, murderers, robbers, horse-thieves, and procurers.

"It really is dangerous to wander about on your own," announced Boyes gravely. "Of course I'm pretty well known and can look after myself, but even I wouldn't go into some alleys I know. For a fellow like you it would be suicide."

They had come to the line of incredibly wretched beggars who squat on the far side of the bridge, when a car sounded its loud horn close behind them. Clive turned his head as they moved aside and he saw it was the car he had used to visit the

Khyber. As it slid past the driver leaned across and stared hard at him. It was then Clive remembered where he had seen the man before. It was the Indian who had dramatically appeared in the room above the Turkish baths in Delhi. He was so surprised that he made an exclamation.

"What's the matter?" enquired Boyes.

"I've just remembered something," replied Clive as they moved down the slope beyond the bridge. "I now know where I met the driver of that car which passed us."

He explained.

"Oh, so you know those baths, do you," said Boyes laughing. "It was a good thing you didn't go there alone. I've heard about them. Tell me more."

Clive did so, and when he mentioned Shahmeeran's disapproval his companion gasped.

"Do you mean to say you've met that woman?" he cried. "You have got about, my lad. I've wanted to meet her for years. She's famous you know; almost as much as Durrani used to be in the place."

Clive described his two visits to Shahmeeran, and Boyes listened with rapt attention as they passed into the city by the great Kabuli Gate. At this point he was about to mention Hassain Ali's visit but became so interested in the animated scene in the busy street that he broke off abruptly. Boyes, instead of urging his companion to continue, decided to wait until later in the day, when he would open the topic again in the club.

They wandered slowly through the various bazaars, until at last they arrived in the large Square of Moneylenders. While watching a vendor of patent medicines, who was extolling his wares in a voice dripping with pious fervour, Boyes caught Clive's arm.

"I say, Penn. See that tall fellow over there?" He indicated the car driver, who was standing in the crowd on the far side. "He's been following us for some time. He is interested in you for some reason."

Clive looked across and recognized the man.

"Oh, that's the fellow I said I saw in the baths at Delhi," he announced quickly, as the driver, seeing himself noticed, turned and disappeared.

"It is, is it?" replied Boyes seriously. "Well, I don't like the look of him. He is from down country and a rogue if I know one." He shook himself slightly. "Come on, let's go. We've seen enough for one day and I've got an uneasy feeling I don't care for."

"Really? What is it?" asked Clive, and they retraced their steps.

"Just that there's trouble brewing. I don't often get the feeling, but when I do I'm generally right. You see I'm not quite what I appear to be."

"Somehow I thought you weren't." Clive grinned as they passed from the Shoemakers Ward into the Coppersmiths. "Major Lake said you were on the civil side of the government."

"Yes, I am, but I don't spend all my time in an office. I know something about the Indian, and especially in this part of the country. When our local government, or Lake, wants to know something about somebody without that somebody knowing, I see what can be done about it. Understand?"

"I think so. You sound like the fellow Kipling wrote about."

"You mean Strickland?"

"Yes."

"Good Lord, I wish I had just a fraction of his knowledge." Boyes turned and smiled at his companion. "Do you mean to say you read Kipling? I thought fellows of your age looked on him as a dull, old bore."

"My father used to read him aloud, so I got interested. Also my uncle gave me several of his books, but I was too young to understand them, although I loved the Jungle Books."

"I consider if more fathers had read Kipling to their children we shouldn't be in the mess out here that we are now," observed Boyes as they passed out of the city. "The average man at home knows as much about this country as he does about Greenland. Come on, let's take a taxi and have a drink at the club. I want to hear more about that woman you met in Delhi."

They had ordered drinks in the bar at the club when a waiter came into the room. The man gave Boyes a letter which he ripped open and read. Lowering the paper he looked across at Clive and made a grimace.

"Here's a job of work for me and I must dash off in a couple of minutes," he said taking a gulp from his glass. "What about coming and having lunch here tomorrow? We could then have a quiet talk."

"I'm sorry I can't. I'm off to Abbottabad and Kashmir in the morning."

"What, so soon? I had no idea you were off just yet. Have you had enough of Peshawar?"

"No, it isn't that at all. I'm just longing to get up into the hills. Every day I've looked at those snows and I want to get closer to them."

"Ah yes, I understand very well. I used to feel like that myself." Boyes finished his drink. "Well, anyway, I'm damned sorry you're going. Perhaps I may run into you up there. I hope to blow up to Srinagar in about three weeks, if I can get away."

The two men parted cordially, leaving Clive with a distinct sense of loss, because he had come to like the little man, who was clearly an unusual character. He ordered another drink and fifteen minutes later walked back to the hotel for lunch, where he was stopped by the receptionist.

"You are leaving tomorrow, saar? You go to Abbottabad?" he suggested.

"Yes, I am catching the morning train."

"Oh saar, if you go by the train it is a long and terrible journey, taking much time and trouble. If you go by motor car it is quick and there are many things misters like to look at beside the road. You can go to Taxilla. All misters say the ruins are exceedingly beautiful."

"I hadn't thought of going by road," said Clive attracted by the idea. "Would it be expensive?"

"Oh no, saar. Very little more than the train. I get you good, cheap motor car. You send your luggage and servant by the train. I will make all the arrangements. It will be a very good thing and the mister will thank me in his heart."

"All right, I will do that," announced Clive making up his mind at once.

"Thank you, saar. The motor car shall be here at nine o'clock, before it becomes pretty damned hot, saar."

The next morning, after a hectic night at the club, where he had dined and danced, Clive paid his bill, gave final instructions to his bearer, and went into the entrance lounge where the receptionist was waiting for him.

"The motor car waits, saar," announced the man beaming.

Clive nodded, went out on to the drive and halted abruptly. There stood the same car and the same driver that he had used to visit the Khyber Pass. The Indian was standing beside the rear door.

"Salaam, sahib," he said smiling.

Clive glared as a wave of uneasiness surged over him. He sensed something was wrong, but had no idea of what it could be. It was too late now to do anything, and what did it matter? He would never see the fellow again when they reached Abbottabad. The car door was flung open, Clive stepped inside, and the journey began.

CHAPTER VII

IN the bungalow at Maddashah Mrs. Herbert left the telephone and was on her way into the lounge to arrange some flowers when her butler approached.

"Memsahib, in the compound is a man who asks for the colonel sahib."

"Tell him to go away and return this evening, Mulla."

"I have done this thing, memsahib, but he will not depart."

"What does he want with the colonel?"

"I do not know, but I think he is a bad man. He is ill-conditioned and much disturbed in mind."

"All right, I will see what he wants, Mulla," said Mrs. Herbert patiently. "Bring him to the verandah."

Mrs. Herbert was accustomed to strange people asking for her husband, and in the past had dealt with many of them. She went out through the french windows and in a few moments the butler appeared. With him was a wild-eyed, ragged, unwashed man, who salaamed deeply.

"What do you want?" enquired Mrs. Herbert. "The colonel sahib is not here."

"Because of this I would speak with the memsahib alone," replied the man glancing in the direction of the butler.

"All right, you may go, Mulla, but remain within call," said Mrs. Herbert, and the servant moved away, his manner showing deep disapproval.

She stared at the stranger, who had squatted down on his haunches, while she half-sat on the wooden arm of a lounge chair. His face was vaguely familiar, but she could not place him.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "Speak clearly and with truth."

"Memsahib, I was Penn sahib's bearer, who the colonel sent to Bombay and I returned here with the sahib."

Mrs. Herbert gasped and got to her feet.

"Penn sahib's bearer? What are you doing here, and in this condition? Where is the sahib?"

"It is not in my mind, O Protectoress of the Poor," replied the man, tears standing in his eyes. "Some grave misfortune has befallen. I have suffered many and grievous things."

"Tell me what has happened," ordered Mrs. Herbert, extremely agitated.

"We lodged in Peshawar, memsahib, and the sahib was to go to the high hills, even to Kashmir. We were to depart to Abbottabad on the train, but the sahib changed his mind and went by the motor car. I went in the train with his boxes. He said he would come to the station in Abbottabad."

The man paused, coughed, and stirred uneasily.

"Yes. Go on. What happened?"

"I speak the whole truth, memsahib. A great shamefulness fell upon me. In the train I was content, suspecting no evil thing. Before the train came to Abbottabad, at a station whose name is unknown to me, two men drew near, saying Penn sahib had sent orders I was to await his coming in a nearby village. Before the gods my mind was free from suspicion, because it is well known to all men that the sahibs do many things without reason.

"I took the sahib's boxes and the train went away. The men carried some of the boxes and put them in an aged motor car and I sat with them. We came to a place where no man was and the motor was halted. Without warning the men fell upon me. A cloth was placed over my head and I was bound with cords. I was taken a great distance and cast into a room where the bonds and the cloth were removed. There I remained many days, only escaping by the softness of heart of one unknown to me. Doubtless some grave misfortune has befallen the sahib, who was as a father to me."

The man broke off, and bowing his head, wept. Mrs. Herbert told him to remain where he was, and hurried off to the telephone where she rang up her husband in his office, explaining what had occurred. He agreed with her the news was disturbing and told her to keep the bearer until he came back to lunch.

Colonel Herbert returned earlier than usual and was greeted with relief by his wife.

"Oh, there you are at last, Peter," she cried. "I've been quite worried and anxious. What does it mean? Surely nothing could have happened to Mr. Penn?"

"No, of course not. I've thought over what you told me. It's obvious the two men who met the bearer knew what was in the wind, travelled on the same train, and invented the story to rob Penn of his luggage. That's quite clear."

Mrs. Herbert nodded doubtfully as they went to the rear verandah where the colonel called to the butler, and ordered him

to produce the bearer. The man hurried across the compound looking less unkempt, having washed and tidied himself.

"Ho, then it is you," said the colonel as he dismissed the butler. "What is this evil thing you have told the memsahib? I wish to hear of it again from your lips."

"Huzoor, I spoke the truth. There was no gain and I have suffered much." The bearer repeated his story.

"How did you escape from the room?" asked the colonel.

"In that room was a small grille in the wall above my head, sahib. One day I heard a woman singing softly to herself outside. I called and she listened. I told of my sad condition and she went away. That same night a man came and softly removed the grille. With much difficulty I raised myself up and he dragged me through the hole as a snake is tugged from the ground when caught by the tail. With tears I praised his softness of heart, but I did not see his face. He spoke roughly telling me to depart from that place in haste. By the hand, it being night and dark, he led me to the edge of the village, saying a town lay some kos along the road."

"What town was this?"

"It was Nowshera, sahib, which lies south of Peshawar."

"Did you report to the police there?"

"Indeed I made report, Huzoor. As the Heaven Born knows the police people are entirely without virtue or sense, and as are buffalos. I told them the sad tale and they made me eat dirt and abuse, saying it was I who had done the evil deed and robbed my sahib. I fled, fearing they would cast me into gaol. I hid in the back bazaar where are many bad men, and by night came to the train, and so to this palace-like house."

A pause followed, while Mrs. Herbert watched her husband's face. Suddenly he turned to her and spoke in French.

"I am certain he is speaking the truth. I have known this man for years and I am sure he is to be trusted. It was obviously a cleverly planned robbery."

"Yes, but what about Mr. Penn? Having lost all his luggage, surely he would have gone to the police?"

"I expect he did."

Mrs. Herbert nodded as the colonel turned to the bearer again.

"How long were you in that room?"

"I do not know, Huzoor. It was the beginning of the second moon that Penn sahib was in Peshawar."

"Good Lord," exclaimed the colonel. "It's now the tenth of March. That must have been over a month ago, Mary."

"Yes, and Mr. Penn has had plenty of time to write and tell us what happened," observed Mrs. Herbert. "I wonder why he was going up by way of Abbottabad? I should have thought Rawalpindi would have been the best."

"Well, there is a road up from there. I expect someone told him to take that." The colonel addressed the bearer again. "I know you to be a man of clean heart, and believe you have spoken the truth. Remain here and I will write letters to Peshawar concerning the matter. You have my leave to go."

"The sahib is my father and my mother," replied the man salaaming deeply. "I will await the Heaven Born's orders."

The bearer returned to the servant's quarters and the Herberts went into lunch.

"What are you going to do?" asked Mrs. Herbert as they sat down.

"Oh, I'll write to Lake in Peshawar. I gave Penn a letter to him and I expect he used it. I will tell him what has happened, and ask if he can find out anything. I must say, Mary, I'm puzzled why Penn hasn't written and told us he had been robbed. After all I did get him the bearer, and he must be thinking he's turned out to be a wrong 'un."

"Yes, and I am really rather worried, Peter. I know what you say is logical, but somehow I feel there is something serious behind it," said Mrs. Herbert gravely.

"Now don't go and get het up about it," advised the colonel soothingly. "Nothing can have happened to the fellow. He's just a decent chap that has had a spot of bad luck. Why fellows are always losing their kits up country, and you know there's little you can do about it, confounded nuisance as it is. I expect he was insured all right."

"But I can't get over the fact he hasn't written and told us. He must also have told the police that his bearer came from us. Why haven't they got in touch with us?"

"Oh, I dunno. Anyway let's wait and see what Lake says."

When Major Lake received Colonel Herbert's letter two days later he did not take it very seriously, in fact he pushed it on one side of his untidy desk and forgot it. Coming across it again when searching for something else he re-read it and then rang up police headquarters. A young police officer answered.

"Is that you, Writtle? It's Lake here. Have you by any chance had a case of robbery connected with a fellow called Penn? I understand his baggage was stolen from a train somewhere between here and Abbottabad about a month ago."

"Hang on a minute, sir, and I'll find out." A long pause followed before the officer spoke again. "No sir. There is no record here. Perhaps the fellow reported it to the Abbottabad people when he arrived. Shall I give them a call and find out, sir?"

"Yes, do Writtle. Ring me back here. I shan't be leaving for a couple of hours."

Some time later the police officer was on the line again.

"Hullo sir. I've got into touch with Abbottabad and they say they have no record, and have never heard of this fellow, Penn."

"Really. That's rather curious," replied Major Lake slowly. "I wonder why he never reported it? Listen to this, Writtle." He read aloud Colonel Herbert's letter.

"Yes, it is strange, sir," agreed the officer. "Colonel Herbert says the bearer doesn't even know the name of the station. That sounds a bit suspicious to me."

"I agree, but I'm blessed if I can understand why Penn never reported the matter, whoever robbed him. Well, thanks Writtle. I'll try and get in touch with this fellow Penn, who may still be up in Kashmir."

"All right, sir. Let me know what happens. I'd be interested to know."

The Political Officer replaced the receiver and proceeded to write a reply to his friend's letter, ending up by saying he would make further enquiries. A sudden rush of work, however, put the matter out of his mind for several days. One evening, when in the club bar he ran into Boyes, who had returned from a brief visit to Kashmir.

"Hullo, Charles. Have a drink," he said genially. "Glad to see you back again. Have a good time?"

"Yes, grand, thanks. I'll have a chota peg," replied Boyes moving closer.

"By the way, while you were up in Srinagar did you run across that fellow Penn I introduced you to here?" asked the elder man after ordering the drinks.

"No, I didn't. I rather expected to because I told him I was going up. I took him down to the city here and showed him round. A nice chap. I liked him."

"Did you make any inquiries?"

"Yes, I did ask at the hotel, but they merely said he hadn't turned up."

"Oh!" The Political Officer made this exclamation so forcibly that his companion glanced at him sharply.

"Anything wrong?"

"Well, I don't really know. The business seems to be taking a fresh turn." He then gave extracts from Colonel Herbert's letter, and his police enquiries.

"Hm, that is a bit queer, I must say," agreed Boyes. "I wonder why he said nothing about it? Naturally I didn't think anything in particular when I heard he had not arrived. He might have stayed anywhere on the way up, or gone down with a dose of fever, or anything."

"Yes, of course. A chap like that wandering up and down the country at his own sweet will might change his mind at a moment's notice. In spite of this, I think I will make a few more enquiries, if only to satisfy old Herbert."

It was at this point Boyes remembered the incident in the Square of Moneylenders, and his feeling on that occasion. He told his companion, who listened and then shrugged his shoulders.

"I expect it was merely a local bad-hat on the look out for a bit of quiet thieving."

"I'm not so sure. He certainly wasn't a local scallywag. Came from somewhere down-country, I'm sure. This fellow Penn also told me he'd seen him in Delhi. By the way, he mentioned he had met the woman, Shahmeeran."

Major Lake whistled softly.

"He did, did he? That is interesting. I wonder who else he met down there? He seems to have moved about a bit. Somebody must have taken him to her, and that somebody must have been an Indian, if I'm not gravely mistaken."

"Yes, I entirely agree."

"Well, there we are. I will have a word with the Commissioner of Police tomorrow, and we will find out exactly where Penn is. In the meantime, Charles, try and locate the car that took him to Abbottabad. The driver is bound to know where Penn stayed the night before going up into the Galis. You're good at that sort of thing."

"Right ho, I will. This is beginning to interest me. I suppose the bearer really was all right?"

"Yes, Herbert was definite on that point, and he is no fool where Indians are concerned. When he makes a statement like that you can bet your life it's right."

The next day Boyes, having a few moments to spare, went to the hotel, and spoke to the babu receptionist.

"A sahib called Penn stayed here some weeks ago, babu."

"Oh yes, saar. A pretty fine mister."

"I understand when he left the hotel he went by car to Abbottabad."

"Oh yes, saar. It was a fine motor car and was used before by the sahib. He was very much pleased with it."

"Whose car was it?"

"I do not know, saar. The driver was not known to me."

"How did Penn sahib get this man? You have your own cars here for guests to use."

The babu paused and showed signs of some embarrassment.

"Oh saar, one day this driver he came to me and said he had a fine motor car and it did not cost much money. He wished me to find sahibs to use the motor car that he might earn money to feed his starving children, saar. Penn sahib desired a motor car to visit the Khyber Pass and I found this motor car."

"Although he had starving children I expect he paid you well?"

The babu looked worried, but Boyes did not press his question. An idea occurred to him and he acted on it.

"Did the driver mention Penn sahib's name to you?"

Again the babu hesitated.

"Tell me the truth. Did he?"

"Yes saar."

"What did he say?"

"He said he had seen the sahib and he looked a good sahib, and a sahib who would not be swiftly angered and say damn damn."

The babu was rapidly becoming nervous under the questioning, and his voice grew apologetic.

"So this driver told you that if Penn sahib wanted a car he should be sent for?"

The babu nodded.

"How much did he pay you?"

"Twenty rupees, sahib."

The babu threw off his babuism and became a scared, English-speaking Indian. Boyes, sensing he was hot on an interesting trail, pressed his questioning.

"Did you tell the driver of this car that the sahib was going to Abbottabad?"

"Oh yes, sahib. Two days before the sahib went away."

"Ah, so he suggested the sahib should use his car and not go by train?"

"Yes, sahib," replied the babu tearfully, now certain that something unpleasant was about to develop.

"It was you that suggested to Penn sahib he should go by road?"

"Yes, sahib. There was no harm, Huzoor. Before the gods it was a fine motor car. Many sahibs have gone from here by the road."

Boyes compressed his lips and thought for a moment, while the babu watched him uneasily.

"Where is the car and the driver now?"

"I do not know, sahib. He has not returned since the sahib left us."

"All right babu. That is enough. You will say nothing of this to any man. If you do I will have you taken by the police."

"Police, sahib!" cried the man aghast. "Oh sahib I am a poor man. I will lock it in my heart. No word shall pass my lips. This is a bad thing. Before all the gods I saw no evil."

Boyes smiled contemptuously and departed. He went at once to the Political Officer's office and related the interview.

"Well, I'm blessed," exclaimed Major Lake, much impressed. "You certainly seem to have picked up a breast-high scent. But what does it mean? I suppose he's been beaten up and robbed. This will interest the commissioner. I had a talk with him and he said he'd trace Penn in no time. I wonder if he will?"

Boyes leaned back in his chair, lazily smoked a cigarette, and looked at the major through half closed eyes.

"What do you know of Penn?" he asked.

"Not much. Only what he told me. Met the Herberts coming out in the ship and they invited him to stay in Maddashah. From there, I gather he went up to Delhi and then on here."

"Who are his people? He must have plenty of cash to be able to joy-ride up and down this country."

"I haven't the faintest idea, Charles, but I only hope to God nothing really serious has happened to him."

"I wonder if he carried much cash on him?"

"How should I know? I should never have given the fellow another thought if it had not been for Herbert's letter." Major Lake turned to his desk. "Well, push off now, old boy. I'm frantically busy. Thanks for telling me. I'll let you know if the police nose out anything. No need to tell you to keep your mouth shut for the time being."

Boyes got to his feet and grinned.

"Yes, I rubbed that into the hotel babu, who nearly fainted when I mentioned the police."

"Good for you."

Several days passed before Boyes again met Major Lake. At once he enquired if there were any news.

"Not a trace, Charles," answered the Political Officer, soberly. "The affair is turning into a first-class mystery. The police are completely foxed. They got Abbottabad to make searching enquiries in the Galis, and even in Murree. As far as they can make out Penn never reached Abbottabad. No one here in Peshawar seems to have paid any attention to the car, which seems curious, because the babu described it to the police as being a very smart grey limousine."

"What about the bearer? Is Herbert still as sure as he was?"

"I think so. Anyway the commissioner has got the man here and the police are nosing about in Delhi seeing if they can pick up a clue. It's your evidence, Charles, which puts a rather different complexion on things. I mean your saying Penn had seen the fellow before and in Delhi. If it hadn't been for that I think we should have to accept it as a fact he was robbed and murdered somewhere. Delhi has now sat up and taken notice because his parents at home have got anxious about not getting letters."

Boyes made a grimace.

"I still wonder, you know, if that bearer didn't know more than he said."

Major Lake shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, we've done all we can. We must just wait and see if anything turns up."

While the two men were discussing Clive in Peshawar, Rugbar in Delhi was on his way to Shahmeeran's house.

"What has befallen, my friend?" she said lazily when he hurried into the room and faced her as she lay on a couch. "When last you came to me you were not alone. Your message savoured of some urgency."

"Indeed it has urgency, O Pearl," answered Rugbar excitedly. "Before noon the police came to my father's house. Arrogantly they demanded news of Penn sahib."

"Bapri Bap!" exclaimed the woman sitting upright. "What is this?"

"They would not divulge, but asked many questions, saying it was well known the sahib and I were friends. They also spoke your name, demanding to be told why I took him to you?"

"Fifty thousand devils! How did this become known?" cried Shahmeeran angrily. "The matter shall be looked into. What answer did you make to their insolence?"

"I spoke softly. Affecting surprise, I asked why I should know of the coming and going of sahibs."

"What then?"

"The police sahib chattered like an angry parrot."

"Ah ho, a police sahib! Then the matter of Penn sahib must have some importance. Continue."

"I spoke all the truth, such as was known to me. I said you were my friend, and he was my friend, and a meeting between friends was as water to the thirsty."

"Well said. Did you speak of Hassain Ali? Was aught known of Bogra's man?"

"No, O Moon of Sind. That lay between us alone and did not concern the sahib."

Shahmeeran laughed and fanned herself with a large, bejewelled fan.

"You have forgotten, my friend, I told you Bogra's man shadowed the sahib?"

"I did not forget," replied Rugbar grinning. "This matter is in your hands. How could I offer it to the police who are ever our unfriends?"

"That was well done. Very well done. You are a worthy son of your father and it shall not be forgotten. Loose speech is ever a dagger in the throat."

"What do these things mean, Shahmeeran? I am gravely troubled because of fear for the sahib. If danger threatened we should not have permitted him to walk alone and unattended."

"Remember, my friend, he who strives to pluck the strings of another man's destiny may snap his own," said Shahmeeran seriously. "You said the sahib went to Peshawar. There, being unwise, he doubtless walked in the back bazaars and Bogra's man struck, although why only the gods know. Or perhaps it was some Peshawar scum that did the deed for paltry gain. I will send and make inquiry. Peshawar was ever a vast nest of cobras, and danger lurks at every corner. Already I have given orders that I am to be acquainted with the reason for Bogra's action concerning the sahib. All that has as yet come to my ears is that both were in Maddashah at the same time. It would seem there is some well-hidden, foul mystery here."

"What if the police come to this house?" asked Rugbar.

"They will not come, even for news concerning a sahib. Once they came, but departed in haste and confusion. No, they will not come again unless I order it so." Shahmeeran laughed sardonically and then became serious. "The sahib

must be missing, why else should the police make inquiry here in Delhi? It would be an evil thing if some grave misfortune has attended him. He had much charm and touched my heart. If Bogra lies behind this, then he shall suffer." The woman's voice took on a metallic ring. "He is foul as carrion is foul. Carrion goes to hyenas and so shall he. I am not without power in this land."

Rugbar nodded vigorously and the woman waved her fan in dismissal.

"Go now, my friend, and leave me to my thoughts. There is work to be considered and carried out. If the police come again to your father's house, send word to me and this nuisance shall cease."

In due course the mystery of Clive Penn reached a point where it could no longer be withheld from the press. The publication of the bald statements caused a considerable stir in India, and the north in particular. People wrote rude letters to the newspapers condemning the lack of zeal in the police force, and many others offered weird suggestions as to what had happened to the missing man. One writer even put forward the theory that Clive had suddenly become a Yogi and gone off to meditate in some mountain cave.

It was Boyes' evidence, together with that of the hotel babu, which lightened official suspicion from Clive's bearer who, however, was still held by the police in Peshawar. Although the fact was not made public, the Chief Commissioner of Police for the North West Frontier Province reported to the governor that it was his considered opinion Clive Penn had been murdered and robbed, in some out-of-the-way spot, and that the possibility of finding his body was remote. The governor concurred, and a report to this effect was sent to the Central Government in Delhi, who passed it on to Whitehall, who, in turn, wrote to Clive's father.

PART II

THE WOMAN

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN the airmail letters from Clive abruptly ceased to arrive each Friday morning in Strattonfield, Muriel Burdon was staying at the vicarage. Her mother had died suddenly, and Angela Penn suggested the arrangement until the girl had decided on her future plans.

Three anxious weeks of waiting for letters passed, until at last the combined efforts of the two women persuaded Mr. Penn to write to the India Office and find out what had happened. He did this, with the result a cable was despatched to Delhi asking for information. The vicar, informed of this, waited for an answer with what patience he could muster. His wife was particularly tiresome during this period. Her continued, plaintive and wild surmises, combined with the expressed wish to know what had happened, became a torture to her easy-going husband, who comforted himself with the assurance that there would be some simple explanation forthcoming.

Muriel, realizing Mr. Penn's state of mind, did her best to help him. She dragged him out for long walks ; whisked him off to the cinema, and insisted on playing chess in the evenings, when the necessity for silence kept Mrs. Penn from her moanings.

Muriel was in her bedroom facing the drive, and about to go down to breakfast when she saw the postman arriving. Hurrying downstairs she went out to meet him. He handed her a small pile of letters in which stood out a long buff envelope addressed to the vicar, and boldly stamped with the words *India Office.* Here at last was the long awaited letter. She stared down at it and her heart beat faster.

"Good morning, Muriel," said Mr. Penn, coming out of the house on to the drive.

The girl turned and faced him. Silently handing over the envelope, he took it, stared down at it, and then slowly and deliberately ripped it open. The girl watched him pull out two sheets of typewritten paper. With unusual slowness he read the contents and then gave the letter to Muriel without speaking. It formally broke the news that Clive had mysteriously disappeared and everything had been done to try and locate

him. There followed a long, tabulated list of Clive's movements, combined with the rest of the known facts. The letter ended with official regrets, and the expression of hope that something more definite would be forthcoming. There was no hint in the communication that it was considered Clive had been murdered; this would follow in another letter.

The girl handed back the papers and lifted her chin. She had made up her mind; the seed of this decision had lain dormant in her brain for some time.

"I'm going out to India to find out what has happened to Clive, Mr. Penn," she announced calmly. "He has got into trouble of some kind. I warned him before he left that he might."

"What! Go out to India?" cried the vicar, his thoughts jerked violently from the fateful letter. "I never heard of such a thing. What could you do that they have not done? Of course you mustn't go."

"But I am going." The tone of the girl's voice made it clear she meant what she had said.

Still holding the letter the vicar stared at the slim, boyish figure and cropped fair hair. Her oval face, with wide-set, grey eyes and features showing high breeding, was pale and determined. The idea of her going out to India alone was so absurd that Mr. Penn almost smiled. What could this slip of a girl, with no practical knowledge of the world, do in the matter? She would probably get into a mess herself.

Seeing her looking at something behind him, he turned and found his wife standing in the porch. She silently held out her hand for the letter. He gave it to her and she read it quickly, watched with some apprehension by the couple on the drive. They waited for a torrent of grief-stricken words, but it did not materialize. Angela Penn lowered the papers and stood rigid, staring across at the line of dark bushes on the far side of the strip of lawn. Her face was more than usually pale and strained, and her mouth slightly open.

"He isn't dead," she announced at last. "If he were I should know it."

Mr. Penn glanced at Muriel, and then putting an arm about his wife's shoulders he turned her, and the party went in to breakfast. It was a strange meal. Hardly a word was spoken, with Mrs. Penn eating mechanically and the others, sometimes absorbed in their thoughts and sometimes watching the elder woman.

"The letter doesn't really tell us anything," observed Angela Penn suddenly, as she looked up and stared at the far wall.

A long pause followed while she continued to stare fixedly. She then put down her knife, her eyes filled with tears, and pushing back the chair she hurried from the room. The vicar and Muriel heard her run up the stairs and the banging of a bedroom door followed.

A week later Muriel set out on her flight to India. The whole business having turned out to be more simple than she thought it would be. The Penns, when they realized she meant to go, helped her in every way. On arriving at Karachi tired, but mentally elated, she went to an hotel, from where she sent off a long telegram to Colonel Herbert telling him that she was arriving by the morning train two days later.

The Herberts, having no idea who she was, were perturbed but resigned.

"It can't be his sister," exclaimed Mrs. Herbert when shown the telegram. "It must be some relative."

Her husband grinned.

"Or a girl friend? Perhaps she's engaged to him."

Both were on the platform to meet their mysterious guest, and it was Mrs. Herbert who first saw Muriel as she stood in the open doorway of her compartment.

"That must be her, Peter?" she said hastily. "Thank goodness she looks a lady."

Colonel Herbert laughed as they forced their way towards the carriage, and Muriel, seeing them coming, stepped down on to the platform. She held out a hand as Mrs. Herbert grew near.

"You must be Mrs. Herbert. I'm Muriel Burdon. Mr. Penn told me a lot about you in his letters."

The two women shook hands and the girl turned to the colonel, whose eyes twinkled as he took her cool palm.

"So you're the mysterious young lady, are you?" he said.

"Yes, and you must be wondering who I am, and why I didn't let you know I was coming before I did," she said gravely. "You see I only made up mind mind to come a few days ago and I knew I should arrive as soon as a letter. I might, of course, have sent a cable, but I thought it would be better to explain in person."

Colonel Herbert nodded and smiled, and, after picking up the girl's two suit cases, he made his way to the exit. When the two women were seated in the back of the car, Mrs. Herbert turned and smiled at the girl.

"Were you engaged to him?" she asked.

"No." Muriel flushed faintly. "We grew up together in the same village, and—." She broke off as her companion interrupted.

"Yes, yes. Of course. I understand," she said quickly.

"Have you had any more news, Mrs. Herbert?"

"No, I'm afraid not, my dear. I expect you know almost as much as we do. It has all been so very disturbing. We were both fond of Mr. Penn." Mrs. Herbert put out a hand and squeezed the girl's arm.

The subject was not mentioned again until they sat down to lunch, after Muriel had been shown to her room, where she washed and tidied herself.

"I am not frightfully worried, you know," announced the girl calmly, glancing first at one and then the other of her hosts. "You see I know practically all he did out here, because he wrote such long and interesting letters to his parents and to me."

The colonel glanced at his wife and she faintly shrugged her shoulders. Swift as it was, Muriel saw the look and the response.

"I know what you are both thinking," she said smiling. "You believe the authorities are right when they consider Mr. Penn has been waylaid and murdered somewhere. They haven't actually said it, but I'm sure it is their view. Isn't that so?"

"I'm afraid it is. You see, it is the only explanation that fits, Miss Burdon."

"I don't think it does at all. What about that Mr. Boyes saying that Mr. Penn recognized the driver as a man he had seen in Delhi? And then there is the hotel clerk's evidence. I also seem to know something that no one else does. Mr. Penn in one of his letters spoke a good deal of some strange woman he met in Delhi, who had found out he was being shadowed by an Indian."

"Good Lord! Was he?" cried Colonel Herbert, much astonished. "Did he say why?"

"No. He seemed to think it rather amusing. So I am going to see the woman, if I can, and find out something more about this."

"Good for you," said the colonel smiling. "But why come to us? We are pleased to have you, of course, but it would seem that your first port of call should have been Delhi."

"Yes. Why did you come here?" added Mrs. Herbert leaning forward.

"To explain that I shall have to tell you what happened at home before Mr. Penn came out here," said the girl slowly.

She then related what had occurred at Oxford, and spoke of the events leading to Clive's trip. Both her hosts listened with absorbed interest.

"So you see I wanted to know if Mr. Penn did anything foolish while he was here with you."

Colonel and Mrs. Herbert hastened to assure Muriel that Clive had behaved extremely well.

"Are you sure he never took too much to drink here in Maddashah?"

"Well, yes," replied the colonel a little doubtfully. "But now you mention it I do remember on his last night here he came back to dinner rather late from the club. He had obviously had a good number of cocktails, but I certainly wouldn't have said he was under the weather. Would you, Mary?"

"No, my dear. He was all right during dinner, but like you, I thought he had perhaps taken one too many at the club."

"Then you were not at the club that night?"

"No, both my wife and I had another engagement."

"I see. Do you happen to know who he was drinking with?"

"From what he told us I gathered it was a Mrs. Strammer, and some of the younger set from the palace," said Mrs. Herbert.

Muriel nodded thoughtfully, and there was silence for a few moments.

"I wonder if he was rude to any of them? He could be, as I have told you."

"I don't think it would have mattered very much if he had been, Miss Burdon," observed the colonel smiling. "That set don't carry much weight here. Now if he had been rude to George, he's our prince, or to his guest, there might have been serious trouble. But I should certainly have heard about it in next to no time."

"Oh, so the maharajah goes to the club?"

"Yes, quite often. I introduced your friend to him, but he wasn't exactly cordial. He rarely is to strangers."

"How interesting. I do wish I could meet the set Mr. Penn was with that night."

"Mrs Strammer is here, but the girls have left the palace," said Mrs. Herbert. She explained who and what these people were.

"Perhaps Mrs. Strammer might be able to help?"

"Yes. My husband and I will take you to the club this evening, and if she is there you shall meet her."

Colonel Herbert was puzzled and turned to his guest,

"I must say I don't quite see where all this is leading. Are you suggesting Mr. Penn has upset some Indian or other, and been kidnapped, or something?"

"Yes, I am."

"It is a possibility, of course." The colonel nodded thoughtfully. "But I assure you, Miss Burdon, young Penn got on very well indeed with the gay sparks from the palace. A bunch of them actually came down to the station to see him off. They garlanded him, which isn't usual, except with the big-wigs. If your friend had given even the slightest offence, that would never have happened."

"Yes. I do see that. You mentioned the prince's guest just now. Who was he?"

"Oh, that was Bogra. He's an old devil of a rajah who lives in a state down south. He has been in rather hot water recently because he shut up a couple of engineers in a hot dungeon. He had to pay quite heavy damages."

"Did Mr. Penn meet him?"

"No, but he was in the bar when I introduced him to George."

"Was he there when Mr. Penn went to the club alone?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, but I should think not. He was leaving the next day, and there was a party on at the palace."

Mrs. Herbert now decided to change the conversation: she asked what her guest thought of India, and what kind of journey she had had in the aircraft.

When the Herberts took Muriel to the club that evening they found Mrs. Strammer sitting alone at a table on the verandah, and as naturally as possible made their way so as to pass close to her.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Strammer. How are you?" said Mrs. Herbert pleasantly, as the party paused beside the table.

Mrs. Strammer, wearing shorts and a tight silk jumper, crossed her legs and looked up.

"I'm quite well, thank you, Mrs. Herbert," she answered coolly. "Good-evening, colonel."

"Good-evening," he replied, grinning faintly. "May we sit down and join you?"

"Yes, do," answered the woman, showing none of the surprise she felt at this exhibition of friendliness from a couple who she knew disapproved of her.

Chairs were pulled up, the party sat down, and as it did so Muriel was introduced. Mrs. Strammer gave the girl a searching look as she acknowledged it.

"Miss Burdon was a friend of Mr. Penn's and has flown out to see if she can find out anything more about his unfortunate case," explained Mrs. Herbert.

"Oh, I thought we all—." The woman broke off abruptly.

"It is all right, Mrs. Strammer," said Muriel quickly. "I'm quite sure nothing serious has happened to Mr. Penn. He and I are very old friends, and I know him well. You see, I think he may have been rude to some Indian who has kidnapped him, or something of that kind."

"Oh," replied Mrs. Strammer blankly. "I hope you're right."

Drinks were now ordered by the colonel, and when the waiter had gone to fetch them, his wife braced herself to broach the reason for their greeting the woman.

"Mrs. Strammer, you may remember that the night before he left us Mr. Penn was in your party here?"

"Yes, he was. I asked him over. He looked lonely standing at the bar."

"That was kind of you," said Mrs. Herbert smiling. "Miss Burdon would like to know who was in the party, and whether—." She paused and picked her words carefully,—"whether Mr. Penn's behaviour was all right."

Mrs. Strammer smiled faintly. So this was the reason why the Herberts had stopped at her table. They wanted information.

"As far as I remember the young man drank a lot of our cocktails, and became rather lit up, Mrs. Herbert," she said slowly. "He told us some new and quite amusing stories."

Muriel leaned forward, her face serious.

"He wasn't rude, was he? I mean not offensive to anyone?" she suggested earnestly.

"No, not that I was aware of. He talked to the girls from the palace most of the time. He left our party rather abruptly, but it was getting late."

"Was His Highness here that evening, Mrs. Strammer?" asked the colonel.

"Yes, he was playing bridge. I remember because we happened to pass the bridge room on our way out."

"I see. Was his guest here also? I mean the Rajah of Bogra?"

Mrs. Strammer laughed shrilly.

"I'd say he was. When we came out of the bar he went past us looking like a thunder-cloud. I'd say something had bitten him, and afterwards at the palace he just sat and glowered at everybody."

"Did you see Mr. Penn again, Mrs. Strammer?" enquired Muriel.

"Yes, when he was snarling at a taxi driver on the drive. But he got in and drove off before we left."

At this point Mrs. Strammer saw three young Indians who had just arrived. Finishing her drink, she got to her feet, bade the party a hasty farewell, and departed. Colonel Herbert looked across at his wife and made a grimace.

"Well, that doesn't seem to have taken us very far."

His wife laughed and shook her head.

"It hasn't really. And now I shall have to ask her to dinner again."

Muriel, having summed up Mrs. Strammer, realized what lay behind the remark.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. And it was all my fault," she exclaimed.

"Don't let that worry you, young woman," replied the colonel, cheerfully. "She isn't a bad sort. She likes to have what she thinks is a good time, and I must say her husband is a bit of an old bore. I've never been able to understand how people so utterly different from each other ever manage to get married."

Muriel nodded as she wondered what Clive had done between the time he had left the bar and when he had got into the taxi.

Two days later, in spite of pressing invitations from her hosts to remain, Muriel left for Delhi to continue her investigations. She went to the George Hotel from where Clive had sent several of his letters. There, in due course, she enquired from the office as to where Rugbar Chand lived, and the morning afterwards set out on foot for Palm House, where she was received by his father as a prospective customer.

"Good-morning. You would like to inspect my collection?" he said bowing. "I have many things to interest you."

The girl, impressed by the old gentleman's distinguished bearing and manners, smiled and shook her head.

"I should like to very much, but not today because I have come to see your son," she said gravely.

"My son?" exclaimed Bhai Chand much surprised.

"Yes. You see I am an old friend of Mr. Penn, who wrote and told me he had got to know your son very well and liked him. I have come out to India to try and find out what has really happened to him."

The old gentleman at once became grave and shook his head several times.

"Ah yes, Mr. Penn. That is a bad case. My son and he were close friends. We have been very much distressed." He indicated a chair. "Please sit down while I send for my son."

He clapped, gave an order to a servant, and sitting down near the girl politely made enquiries as to who she was. Muriel explained quickly and her companion listened attentively. When she came to the end, he spread out his hands and shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, I think there is some mystery here, Miss Burdon. My son and I know much of what you have told me, but we are simple collectors and those who touch hot embers are burned."

Bhai Chand turned as Rugbar approached. The situation was swiftly explained to him by his father, who suggested they should go into a private room. This was done, and thick black coffee was served in priceless Chinese porcelain. Muriel now told all her story, including the affair at Oxford, and ended up with her own deductions. When she mentioned that Clive had written to her about Shahmeeran, and the fact that he was being shadowed, father and son exchanged glances, and Muriel saw them.

"So you see I have come to you hoping that you may be able to give me a few extra clues," she said, smiling at Rugbar.

"You have been very frank with us, Miss Burdon," observed the old gentleman gravely. "We are much honoured." He looked at his son and nodded. "We also will speak with open hearts. Tell her, Rugbar."

"It is clear to us that you know almost as much as we do," began Rugbar, who was sitting facing the girl. "It is sure that the driver of the car used by Mr. Penn in Peshawar was the same man who shadowed him here in Delhi."

"Who was he?" exclaimed Muriel eagerly.

"All that is known of him is that he was a man employed by the Rajah of Bogra who lives in the south. But if he was working for this rajah is not known."

"Did you tell the police?"

"No, Miss Burdon. To have done so might have made much trouble, and that would have been bad for my father's business. Many princes come to this house, and to lose their favour by spreading rumours would indeed be a bad thing."

"Yes, I understand," replied the girl. "I am very glad I came here, because now I am certain Mr. Penn has been rude to the rajah."

"Shahmeeran said that very thing, but although deep inquiry has been made no news has come to her."

"But my son, if it were as Miss Burdon says, it would explain all," said Bhai Chand quickly. "Take Miss Burdon to Shahmeeran. She will fit the pieces together as you and I join broken shards."

He turned to Muriel. "This rajah is an evil man, and if your friend was rude to him he might have taken revenge."

"He wouldn't have hurt him, would he?"

"To have done so would be very dangerous. He is not liked by your people. He has also recently burnt his fingers, as you say." The old gentleman told the story of the engineers.

"Yes, I have heard about that," answered Muriel, smiling. "We must hope the worst that has happened to my friend is that he is in some dungeon."

Bhai Chand looked doubtful and shook his head.

"You will have to find sure proof, Miss Burdon. You cannot go to him and say you think he has got your friend in a cell. He might laugh at you, or worse, murder Mr. Penn, and then you would never find him."

"Yes, I fully realize that." She turned to Rugbar. "Can I go and see Shahmeeran?"

"I will send a letter to her," he answered. "I do not know if she will ask you to go to her house. She has no love for this prince, and because of this she may help you."

Rugbar departed to send off the letter, and Muriel was shown some of Bhai Chand's more precious possessions before returning to her hotel.

The next day Rugbar rang up to say Shahmeeran would receive them at three o'clock, and that he would call for her in his father's car.

Muriel already knew a good deal about Shahmeeran, Clive having described her in detail, and as a result she took more than usual care over her toilet. Instead of having an afternoon rest, as the other guests in the hotel did, she put the finishing touches to her finger nails, and went down to wait for Rugbar in the comparatively cool, empty lounge. Sitting in a cane chair she smiled and looked towards the swimming pool. How shocked Angela Penn would be if she knew of the coming visit to a woman of ill-fame.

Glancing at her wrist watch she saw it was half-past two. Should she go and get a book? While debating whether to make the effort, footsteps behind caused her to turn her head. Approaching was a young, heavily made-up young woman dressed in a short skirt, bead necklaces, and jangling bracelets.

"Hullo. All alone?" she said, stopping beside Muriel's chair. "May I join you? I'm alone too, and frightfully fed up."

"Yes, do sit down," replied Muriel smiling.

"Thanks, frightfully." The girl sat down and crossed her bare legs, ending in highly coloured sandals. "I'm Doris Smith and waiting to go home," she announced. "I saw you at breakfast this morning. Haven't been out long, have you?"

"No, quite a short time."

"Do you like India?" she continued, lighting a cigarette. "I thought it was ever so nice when I came out. Now it's just lousy, if you ask me."

"Are you on your own?" enquired Muriel, wondering what such a girl could be doing in India at all.

"I am now. The others——" The girl shrugged her shoulders and sniffed. "Well, we had a quarrel. You see, I came out with three other girls and we went to stay with an Indian prince. He was a gorgeous boy, and we had a grand time. But, of course, we couldn't stay there all the time, could we?"

"No, I suppose not," answered Muriel gravely. "Who was the prince?"

"Oh, him. He's the Maharajah of Maddabad."

"Really!" Muriel sat upright in her surprise. "How strange. I've just come from Maddashah, where I was staying with Colonel and Mrs. Herbert. Then you would have known Mrs. Strammer?"

"Oh yes, I know her. A jolly good sport," replied the girl quickly. "Just my sort she is."

"This is a remarkable coincidence," exclaimed Muriel, leaning forward. "I expect you met Mr, Penn also? He was in Mrs. Strammer's party at the club one night."

"You mean the boy there's been all that fuss about in the papers? Lost himself, or something, didn't he?" The girl laughed shrilly. "Yes, I met him all right. Oh boy, couldn't he throw back cocktails. Was he a friend of yours?"

"Yes, we're very old friends. That is why I have come out to try and find out something more about him."

Doris looked at her companion with increased interest.

"Was he a boy friend of yours?"

"Not exactly." Muriel frowned slightly. "We come from the same village, you know. We grew up together." She laid a hand on the girl's arm. "I think you might be able to help me. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"No. Ask away. I'll answer if I can."

"Did you meet a Rajah of Bogra, who was staying in the palace when you were there?"

"I'd say we did. Gave me the creeps. The way he looked at you, the old devil." The girl wriggled her thin shoulders. "I wouldn't like to be on my own with him on a dark night."

"Did you talk to him, Miss Smith?"

"Yes, I did once or twice, but he was frightfully keen on Mona, who's a bit like you to look at. She was one of the other girls you know. Mona couldn't stand him, and when he gave her a gorgeous bangle she handed it back. Silly little fool. I'd have kept it and smiled nicely."

"Did this rajah ever mention Mr. Penn's name?"

The girl wrinkled her forehead as she considered this.

"Now you mention it, he did. It was at a party they had at the palace before he left. And, oh yes, now I remember, it was the same night I met the Penn boy and he drank all those drinks down at the club. I sat next to the rajah and he asked me if I knew him."

"And what did you say?"

"I said yes, and I thought him a nice boy. He said he wanted to know who he was, and so I said I didn't really know, and he'd better ask Mrs. Strammer, who had introduced us."

"What happened then?"

"He looked at me rather fierce and talked to Mona, and I heard him ask her the same question."

"Thank you very much indeed, Miss Smith," said Muriel gratefully. "You have helped me a great deal."

"Have I? Why? I don't see why the old devil asking me a question should help." Doris looked across with puzzled blue eyes.

"But it has, because I've been trying to find out if this rajah were interested in Mr. Penn. Now you have confirmed that he was."

"Ooh!" exclaimed the girl, light dawning on her. "You mean he might have had something to do with that boy's disappearing, and all that?"

"Perhaps. But it is only a slight clue." Muriel rested a hand for a moment on her companion's arm. "Please don't mention this little talk to anyone, will you? It is rather important."

"I won't, if you don't want me to. But I think it's frightfully exciting him being mixed up in this. The old devil."

"I didn't say he was, Miss Smith. I said it was just a clue, which is a very different thing."

A few minutes later Muriel saw Rugbar arrive, and after a hasty goodbye to the girl, hurried out on to the drive. On the way to the Chandhi Chowk she told him what had just taken

place. He expressed surprise and agreed it had a bearing on the case.

Shahmeeran received them on the roof under an awning, where it was cooler than in the stuffy room below. Dressed in a simple lilac silk gown, her only jewellery was a magnificent drop emerald hanging on her forehead. Slowly and gracefully she slid off a couch and the two women faced each other in silence. Rugbar then came forward and introduced them. Shahmeeran held out her hand, which Muriel took.

"I am honoured above all by your visit," she said in English. "Sit down please."

The girl smiled and they sat down side by side on the couch, while Rugbar stood leaning against one of the awning supports. Shahmeeran began to speak slowly in English.

"Rugbar sent me a letter. He says you know much of Penn sahib."

"Yes, I know him very well."

"You were betrothed to him?"

"No."

"You were lovers?"

Muriel flushed and shook her head.

"No, we were very old friends. We lived in the same village and were children together."

"Good. Tell me please. Rugbar says you have other news concerning this sahib. He touched my heart. I would help, but nothing of importance can be discovered. Many enquiries have been made. Tell me what is known to you. I will judge. I will understand."

Once more Muriel told all she knew about Clive, and the woman listened attentively, although now and again she interrupted to ask Rugbar to translate some word or phase she did not understand. The girl ended with her recent talk with Doris Smith, and Shahmeeran looked very grave as she compressed her lips.

"This has lifted a veil. It is to Bogra we must look. What befell the sahib and this prince does not matter. We must consider what can be done."

Rising to her feet she began to pace up and down in the shade thrown by the awning. Muriel and Rugbar watched her in silence. Several minutes passed. Then Shahmeeran gave a little cry and clapped her hands.

"A thought from the gods has arrived," she exclaimed, hastening back to her seat, where she turned to the girl. "You

have courage. You are not like the miss-sahibs in this country. You should have been a man, even as I should be. Listen. I am not without power, and yet I can get nothing from Lingam. Bogra's palace is as a gaol from which no news escapes. A man known and trusted has been two moons in that place, and still his ears have caught no whisper. Bogra has grown cunning. Here then is the plan. You shall go to Willis sahib who is the government in Lingam. Let it be known to him that you seek knowledge concerning Indian life. I will have it whispered in the palace that you wish to meet Bogra. If it be indeed true he coveted the miss-sahibs in the palace at Maddashah he will fall into the net. From then onwards what befalls will lie in your hands. I know men. If desire be strong enough he will deny you little. Do you understand? Have you the courage to attempt this thing? It will be as if you faced a ravening tiger."

Startled by this daring plan, Muriel hesitated. She then lifted her chin and looked at her companion with steady grey eyes.

"Yes, the idea is a very good one. I will do it," she said simply.

"Good. Very good," cried Shahmeeran with sincere admiration. "It will not be easy. If you find some proof Bogra has this sahib, I will act."

"You will act?"

"Yes, together we will handle it. In such things the government is slow as a buffalo. It walks carefully as the cat. Much time would be lost. No word of what is toward must escape from us."

"Yes, but what about Major Willis? I shall have to tell him and get him to help me," said Muriel.

"Yes, he must share the secret. He is no fool and has learned the value of silence," replied Shahmeeran. "One thing remains. If Bogra becomes dangerous tell him I know. It will help. He is an unfriend of mine, but he fears me. Trust no one in Lingam, unless I give the name. I will send word to Willis sahib. Now let us discuss other matters."

Muriel left the house an hour later, and returning to the hotel wrote a long and non-committal letter to Major Willis, in which she said she had come out to India to study the Indian states. She asked if he could arrange for her to be accommodated in Lingam.

In due course a cordial letter arrived from Mrs. Willis inviting Muriel to stay with them for as long as she wished. The

girl tore up the letter, packed her suit cases, and set out for Lingam without telling anyone her destination, although the hotel clerk seemed anxious to know where she was going.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN Clive left the hotel in Peshawar for Abbottabad he sat in the rear of the car. On leaving the cantonments he took out a guide book and turning to the description of the Greek ruins at Taxilla, read it with increasing interest.

The driver sat erect with his eyes fixed on the road, but on two occasions, when Clive glanced up, their eyes met in the driving mirror above the windscreen. Each time he experienced a slight qualm of uneasiness; it was a feeling he got now and again without warning, and generally meant something unpleasant was about to happen.

They were about an hour and half from Peshawar, and crossing a deserted but highly cultivated area, with the foothills on the left, when the saloon slowed down on the outskirts of a village. Stopping the car the driver turned in his seat.

"There is a man known to me in this village, sahib. It is permitted that I may go and speak with him?"

"Yes, all right, but don't be too long," replied Clive, who was glad of the excuse to get out and stretch his legs.

The man slipped down from his seat and hurried away behind the mud walls of a nearby house. Clive also got out. Lighting a cigarette, he strolled about the area which was empty, except for two cur dogs, who snarlingly inspected him from a safe distance. They lifted their noses and obviously loathed the scent of this stranger.

Some minutes passed and Clive returned to his seat. He was becoming impatient when the driver returned carrying a cheap, thick cup.

"Here is some coffee, sahib," he said amiably. "It is safe and the water boiled. I made it myself."

Clive was about to refuse, but changed his mind. To refuse would be churlish, and he accepted the cup, which was nearly full with a thick, black, steaming liquid. The driver turned away and inspected the tyres, while Clive sipped the drink. It had a pleasant, rather sickly taste, hardly resembling that of coffee, but he managed to drink most of it. The man took back

the cup, threw away the dregs, and instead of returning the cup he carried it with him into his seat.

The gears slid in, the car glided forward, and soon they were travelling fast over a fairly good road. It had now grown hot, very hot, and Clive felt drowsy. He fell asleep. When he awoke he blinked, spluttered a little, and realised he had a very bad headache. He then grasped several things in quick succession. He was lying across the rear seats of another car with dark blue glass in the windows; his wrists and ankles were securely bound; his tongue felt several sizes too large for his mouth and, finally, it was clear they were travelling very fast over a poor road.

For several minutes Clive lay still, badly scared. What did this mean? It looked as if he had been kidnapped. But who would want to do such a thing to him? There was no doubt he had been drugged. If the driver had wanted to rob him why hadn't he done so and left him by the roadside? God! How thirsty he was. Twisting his neck he dimly saw the driver's back and that of another man sitting beside him.

"Hi, driver. Why am I tied up like this?" he called in a hoarse voice. "What the devil do you think you've been doing?"

At the sound of his voice the two men glanced at each other, but neither turned. After a pause Clive repeated his last question, but still the men paid no attention. Silence followed, except for the purr of the car and an occasional bumping creak as it bounced over a pot-hole.

Clive grew numb and panic stricken, his thoughts darting wildly from one unanswerable question to the next. What were they going to do with him? Where were they going? What was the time? How long had he been under the influence of the drug? How his head ached; it seemed to expand and contract and attempt to push his eyes from their sockets. He must have a drink. Calling to the driver he asked for a drink of water. The man hesitated and then brought the car to a halt. The man beside him got out and going to the rear flung open the door and held an old gin bottle full of water to Clive's mouth. He drank greedily and when the bottle was half empty the man took it away, replaced the cork, and went back to his seat.

The journey continued. On, and on, and on. Would this nightmare go on for ever? Clive felt as if it had been in progress for days. He grew mentally exhausted, and the motion sent him off into uneasy sleep. Night came and went, and still they rushed ahead. Once the car stopped and Clive heard excited whispering

before the journey recommenced. Another day passed and, except for an occasional drink, the men paid no attention to him. It had grown fiercely hot, and perspiring freely Clive reached a state of desperation where he ceased to care what happened to him as long as this journey came to an end, and he knew the worst.

It was night when the car finally stopped. The rear door was flung open and in complete darkness a pair of hands fumbled for Clive's shoulders. He was roughly dragged out and set on his feet. His legs were so cramped that he would have fallen had not the arms closed about his middle. Two men whispered together, and then another pair of hands took hold of him. Half-pushed and half-dragged he was taken several yards, up four shallow steps, across a verandah and in through a narrow door. Someone then fumbled for a door handle. With a heavy creak a door swung open and Clive was hauled into a room and placed on a chair. His bonds were removed, the door slammed, a key turned in the lock, and he was alone.

For several minutes he remained motionless in the chair and then, putting out his hands, felt the arms and used them to raise himself further into the seat. The effort was painful to his sore, cramped wrists and he rubbed them gently. He then tried to penetrate the almost tangible darkness, which smelled of damp and stuffy neglect. The chair was covered with a worn velvet, and as he attempted to get to his feet he staggered, put out a hand, and came in contact with the polished edge of a round table. Slowly he made his way about the room, feeling with outstretched hands. There were several chairs, a low sideboard, and two heavily shuttered windows secured on the outside. He found the door and leaning against it beat on the panels, demanding to be let out. Afrer each bout of thumping he listened; there was no sound other than his own uneven breathing. He slid down and crouched beside the wall.

The hours slid by. Suddenly he remembered his lighter and cigarette case. Feverishly he searched his pockets; they were there. He flicked the lighter, and when it burst into tiny flame it gave him enormous relief. But how long would it last? He must conserve it with great care. Glancing at his wrist watch he saw that it had stopped. He then lit one of his eleven cigarettes and instantly felt very much better. He even began to think again in something like a normal manner, but not for long because the everlasting why intruded itself. On and on through the night his thoughts revolved about the problem to

which he could find no answer. He would be missed. The police would trace him. Or would they?

He had moved to a position near the right window where a tiny chink of light was filtering through the bottom of a shutter, when he heard footsteps approaching. The key turned, the door swung back letting in a flood of light. A short man appeared carrying an earthenware jar and a plate on which were a few rounds of dark brown, unleavened bread. Placing the articles on the table the man withdrew and the footsteps died away. For three days this proceedure took place, morning and evening, but on the fourth day there was a dramatic change. The shutters were suddenly unbarred and flung back, letting into the room a burst of brilliant sunshine which partly blinded Clive. Confused, and with a hand shading his eyes, he made for the nearest window. When he could see again he eagerly stared out, and clung to the bars set in the window frame.

A man on guard was pacing up and down a narrow verandah and beyond, across what had once been a garden bed on a long slope, Clive could see distant trees and a glimpse of calm water. For a long time he drank in the scene, listening to the hum of busy insects in a nearby bush. Turning from the window he stared about the room, whose every detail stood out with hard brilliance. A small mirror hung over the sideboard and he went and peered into it. The shock of what he saw made him draw in his breath sharply. His face was dirty white, his hair wildly disordered, and on his chin several days growth of beard. His eyes looked strange and dark rimmed, and sunk deeper in their sockets. Lifting a hand he tried with open fingers to straighten his hair. He felt his chin and shivered.

The door was then flung open and Clive watched a muscular Indian with a brutal, sensuous face, stride into the room carrying a thick, pliable whip. Behind him came two men, each holding a large tray. These were placed on the table and the first man promptly hustled the others out of the room. As soon as the door was closed Clive went across and looked down at the trays. He gasped with astonishment. Here was an elaborate lunch served in European fashion, complete with glass, napery, and cutlery. One plate held clear soup, there was a fish mayonaise, half a roasted chicken, salad, biscuits, butter, and a bottle of beer; even black coffee and sugar had not been forgotten.

Clive pulled up a chair, sat down, and proceeded to eat and drink. When the meal was done he felt a different person, until a bout of indigestion gave him a violent headache. Leaning back

in the chair he would have given a good deal for a cigarette, having smoked the last in his case. He considered this new problem. Why had he been treated in this surprising fashion? Suddenly he realised the truth. He was being submitted to a subtle form of torture. The recent meal was intended to be a forcible reminder of what he had lost. Leaning forward among the soiled plates he buried his head in his arms, and breaking down for the first time, wept bitterly. An hour later the trays were removed and the shutters closed.

Three more days passed, during which he was kept in dark- and fed on bread and water. By this time his mental and physical resistance became dangerously low. His mind grew clouded, and he no longer walked about the room, but crawled on all fours like an animal.

It was on the fourth morning that he was hustled out of the room by the man with the whip. Blinking and shuffling he paused at the top of the four steps leading down from the verandah. The man close behind ordered him forward, but when he still hesitated the whip was lifted and he was given a sharp blow across the shoulders. Clive pitched forward and rolled down the steps on to the weed-grown path, where he lay on his side. The Indian now bent down, caught him by the arm and dragged him roughly to his feet. Several minutes later Clive staggered towards a great pile of limestone rocks which had been dumped beside the water of the lake. Standing near it was an Indian, who watched his approach with deep interest. The man was dressed in a long, tight-fitting white coat, with jodhpurs below, and on his head a compactly-wound, light blue pugri in which was pinned a huge diamond brooch. It was the Rajah of Bogra come to inspect his captive.

"We meet again, my friend," he said in clipped English. "Do you remember me?"

At the sound of the voice Clive, who had been bent forward in his efforts to walk more quickly, straightened himself and stared dully at the speaker.

"You do not remember me. No?"

Clive shook his head slowly and several times.

"Ah, but I remember you, my friend. I will help you. You stayed at Maddashah. I also stayed in that place. In the club house you went to a certain place. We faced each other in the door. Do you not remember? You spoke to me. Your words were those of an unfriend." The rajah paused as he saw from Clive's face he was remembering the incident. "Ah ho. Now

you recall, my friend. For those foul words I need atonement. You understand? My face was blackened. We also have our pride, dog." Bogra's evil face became devilish for an instant. "You see those rocks. You shall break them with your hands, beating one against another. In your arms you shall carry them. You shall work for my pleasure and your atonement. You understand? From dawn until sunset you shall labour. You shall live like the dog you are." He made a signal to the gaoler who raised his whip and struck Clive several heavy blows across the back and shoulders causing him to wince with pain. "That is a warning, my friend. If the hands be unwilling, or the spirit lags, it shall be spurred on in such a manner."

Bogra turned abruptly, and striding away vanished behind some bushes.

It was dark when Clive was driven back, not to his previous place of confinement, but to a cage which had once held a large leopard. It was almost hidden among thick, deep bushes, and faced what was still an artificial waterfall down which streamed a film of water. He was pushed through a small door in the thick iron bars and it was secured by a clumsy Indian padlock.

Week followed week. Clive laboured unceasingly until his finger nails were worn away and he grew sub-human. Each week, however, and on the same day, he was taken back to his cage at noon where he was given a full-course European meal.

The routine did not vary. A fairly substantial meal was pushed into the cage before sunrise, and then he would be ordered out by the same man, at the same time. At the pile of stones he squatted breaking one against another, and these were carried in his arms to a spot where a dam was to be erected. This was to be about six feet wide and seventy yards long. When it had reached a foot in height he was given a basket and after filling it with earth, grubbed up with his hands, it was poured on to the stones and trampled down by his feet. There followed more stones and more earth.

His clothes were removed and he worked naked, Bogra living up to his threat to treat him as a dog. His skin grew dark, and his hair fast reached his shoulders, where it hung in a tangled mass. His unwashed body was caked with dust and dried perspiration.

On one occasion, when given the European meal, there was a neatly folded newspaper lying beside one of the plates. Lying wearily against the wooden walls of the cage Clive saw it. He stared at it dully for a long time. Listlessly he leaned forward

and picked it up, fumbling with it like a child would do. His eyes became fixed on a paragraph whose corners had been boldly marked with black crosses. He saw his own name. Slowly, single word by single word, he read :

Missing Briton.

From Peshawar comes the news of the mysterious disappearance of an Englishman, Mr. Clive Penn. This young man left Peshawar for Abbottabad by car some weeks ago. It appears that he never reached his destination and all trace of him has vanished.

The police of the North West Frontier Province are making exhaustive enquiries, but so far there is no clue as to what has happened to Mr. Penn.

Mr. Penn was on a visit to India and was to have gone up to Kashmir.

Clive lowered the paper, stared vacantly through the bars, and then, in a fit of childish fury, he tore the newspaper into small pieces.

CHAPTER X

DURING the long, dusty journey south from Delhi to the junction, where she was to be met by the Willises, there being no railways in Bogra State, Muriel thought a good deal of what Shahmeeran had said. It was of prime importance that the real reason for her visit to Lingam should be kept secret, and the fewer people who knew about it the better. She hoped the resident would meet her alone so that she could talk to him before meeting his wife.

When she stepped down from her compartment on to the hot platform, with its tiresome glare, Major Willis hurried towards her and she was relieved to find that he was alone. He greeted her warmly, his thin, lined face crinkled up in a friendly smile. Even his angry blue eyes seemed less angry. When Muriel took her place by his side in the front seat of a large maroon saloon she apologized for her presence.

"Not a bit, Miss Burdon," exclaimed Major Willis, grinning boyishly. "We're jolly glad to have you. Not many people come down here. A visitor is something of an occasion and we make the most of it."

"That's very nice of you to put it like that." Muriel glanced at her companion's small wiry frame and thin restless hands as they sped out on to a good road. "I suppose you know the real reason why I've come?"

The resident made a slight grimace and shrugged his shoulders.

"To be quite frank, I don't. I got word from Shahmeeran there was something in the wind regarding your visit, but what you'd got to do with that strange figure I couldn't make out. What do you think of her?"

"I've never met anyone quite like her before," replied the girl gravely. "It is difficult to say. I think she is very fascinating and clever."

"Yes, and you would have added amazing as well, if you knew as much about her as I do. She's what I'd call a living legend. Now tell me, what's all this about?"

The girl told her story, and Major Willis listened attentively, nodding now and again.

"Well I'm damned," he exclaimed, when she came to the end. "I admire your pluck in coming out here on your own. You certainly seem to have picked up a clue or two. Of course we knew about the Penn case and thought, like everybody else, that he had been waylaid, murdered and robbed." The resident glanced at his companion with sincere admiration. "May I ask what you mean to do here? I know a good deal of what is going on, but I haven't heard a blessed thing which might concern young Penn."

"No, I don't expect you have. You remember I said just now that Shahmeeran had a man of hers in the palace and even he knew nothing."

Major Willis nodded and looked puzzled.

"Yes, that's what I don't understand. If she can't get anything, what about you?"

Muriel looked gravely at her companion and spoke very distinctly.

"It is my intention, Major Willis, to get into the palace by some means or other."

"Yes, and then what will you do?" he enquired quickly. "Make eyes at our old devil, eh?"

"That is exactly what I propose to do."

"Oh, my sainted aunt," exploded the resident, torn between amusement and amazement. "Do you realise you'd be dealing with something as deadly and dangerous as a king cobra?"

"Yes, I'm fully aware of that." Muriel smiled. "But I am told it is possible to charm almost any kind of snake with a reed pipe. Well, substitute feminine wiles and you have something of the same kind in this case."

Major Willis was so shaken by this plan that it was sometime before he spoke again.

"I'm afraid you won't be able to do it, Miss Burdon. You see, while you are staying here, you're in my care. If anything happened I should get into very serious trouble."

"But nothing serious will happen. I'll see that it doesn't," answered the girl quietly, but firmly. "As I told you, Shahmeeran is going to have it whispered in the palace that I want to meet the rajah. If he invited me to the palace you can hardly stop me going if I want to, can you?"

"I'm not sure," replied the resident frowning. "If things went wrong I'd be told I should never have allowed you to go alone. Bogra has an evil reputation, and the government in Delhi know it as well as I do."

"But merely because I happen to be staying with you doesn't make you my guardian, surely?"

"Oh yes, out here it does. Unattached young women floating about Indian states are liable to get into difficulties and have to be watched. That's why they are not welcome."

"Yes, I see. It wouldn't really be fair on you," observed the girl thoughtfully. "Well I shan't tell you if I'm going or not, and then you will be able to say truthfully that you didn't know."

"We must wait and see what happens. In any case I must know what you are up to," stated the resident sighing. "I don't suppose it would matter much anyway. I'm not going to get any further promotion, and if they kick me out I shouldn't be sorry. Mine isn't exactly a pleasant job here."

Muriel impulsively put a hand on his arm.

"It is good of you to put it like that," she said, "but if there is trouble, Shahmeeran would know about it and come to my aid."

"That remains to be seen."

"I think we should keep this a secret between ourselves, don't you, Major Willis?"

"Yes, I agree. We'll even let my wife think you're just on a simple visit. If she knew she would worry, I'm sure."

The thirty-mile drive across flat, open country continued in silence until Muriel turned and smiled.

"At least you will let me live up to the part I am to play here, Major Willis? What I mean is, you won't stop me wandering about the city on my own, will you?"

"No, I won't do that. You'll be all right in the city. The people are too wretched and down-trodden to make trouble of any kind." He shook his head. "You will soon get tired of that, because its hot, and smelly, and not very interesting."

"But you are forgetting I know very little indeed about India," answered the girl. "Even if it were not part of the plan, I should be keenly interested, and when I tell Mrs. Willis I am studying Indian life it will be partly the truth."

"Yes, but I bet Amy smells a rat. She's quick at that sort of thing, and I shall have to do a lot of skating over thin ice. By the way, we never talk about anything of importance in front of the servants here. Ours are imported, but in spite of this everything that goes on reaches the palace sooner or later. Nothing would please Bogra more than to catch me out, if he could."

"How unpleasant being spied on like that." Muriel shivered. "Do you think he would torture Mr. Penn, if he really has got him? The thought keeps me awake at night sometimes."

"He's quite capable of it, Miss Burdon," said the resident slowly. "It rather depends on what this young fellow did, or said, to Bogra. Anyway he'd think twice before he did do anything like that, because he got into very hot water not long ago over two engineers who were putting in electric light here."

"Yes, I know all about that. You should have heard the names Shahmeeran called him."

Major Willis laughed and pointed to where a low hill had appeared on the skyline some miles ahead.

"There's Lingam," he said. "The palace stands on a whacking great rock which rises out of the plain. The city itself is clustered about the base."

"It looks quite exciting. Where do you live?"

"Us? Oh, we're away behind the city on the far side from here. Our nearest neighbour is the state guest house, and that's rarely used."

The resident now asked the girl some personal questions until they skirted the low, red walls of Lingam and eventually came to a rambling bungalow set in a pleasant garden with smooth lawns, greener than anything Muriel had yet seen in the state.

"Everything is drying up fast now before the rains," said her host, as they drew up at the steps leading up to the verandah.

"The garden is almost void of flowers, but we manage to keep the grass in fair condition."

He led the way up the steps, and as they crossed the verandah Mrs. Willis came out of the bungalow with a pleasant, welcoming smile. They shook hands and the girl was at once swept off to her room, where her hostess fussed over her as if she had been an old friend.

"It's so very nice having someone like you to stay," she announced gaily, as she rearranged several articles that did not need attention. "This place is so far off the beaten track that we don't get many visitors."

"Yes, so your husband was saying," replied Muriel feeling sorry for the elder woman, whose thin face looked tired in spite of her animation. "It really is awfully nice of you to have me, all the same. I'm sure I shall find it very interesting here."

"What made you choose Bogra State of all places, when there are so many other far nicer spots?" enquired Mrs. Willis, watching her guest tidying herself.

"You see I wanted to visit a real old-fashioned Indian state, and someone suggested it to me. I looked it up in a guide book but it hardly mentioned it."

Mrs. Willis nodded, but was still obviously puzzled. She then asked questions similar to those of her husband, and Muriel answered them freely and easily, but she made no mention of Clive. Tea was then brought in to a small, cool lounge, and the Willis's did their best to entertain their guest.

When Muriel announced her intention of going to the city alone, Mrs. Willis protested, but her husband supported the idea and the girl continued. "I've found you see much more if you go sightseeing on your own, Mrs. Willis. When I'm with someone else I always have the feeling they are bored with what happens to interest me. I think you have got to know a companion very well to do that sort of thing together. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, that is true, but all the same I think it's unwise to go on your own. I haven't been to the city more than twice since we have been here, have I, Peter?"

"No, I don't think you have. All the same I'm sure it will be all right. Besides Miss Burdon is new to bazaars and things like that. She'll probably find it enthralling."

The elder woman shrugged her shoulders, and the conversation turned to more general topics. Mrs. Willis asked many pathetic questions about London, and fashions, and the latest plays.

At dinner Muriel enquired if there were anything else of interest in the neighbourhood, apart from the city and the palace.

"No, not really," answered her host. "There is a small lake some miles out, where Bogra has a shoot. We sometimes drive out there in the evenings. It's a pleasant spot and cooler than it is here. We were going out last week, but they seem to be doing some work on the road. There is a culvert up and so the road is blocked. No one uses it very much so I suppose the workmen are taking their time."

The following morning, in spite of further mild protests from Mrs. Willis, Muriel set out on her first tour of inspection, leaving her hosts to carry on their usual routine. Outside the garden she turned left on to a dusty road which wound beside a large, untidy ditch beyond which was the castellated wall of the city, built of a dull yellow stone.

It was half past nine and the sun was growing more powerful every minute. Muriel was extremely hot before she came to a narrow gate in the walls. This lay across the ditch and she was forced to go down into it and scramble amid dust and rubbish before reaching the actual gate. Once inside, the dead, stale heat struck her like a blow, and she paused and gasped. Before her stretched a lane, and picking her way over the uneven surface she looked about at the squalor of the area. There were high mud walls, roughly thatched hovels, between which other and narrower lanes branched off. In them were mangy curs, filthy children, and numerous monkeys, which leapt from wall to wall at her approach.

Deeply interested, the girl walked slowly, followed by chattering insults from the monkeys, and dark, glum looks from both men and women. Now and again she peeped in through an open doorway to a tiny courtyard, in which was garbage, dust, a few bedraggled plants, aged bedsteads, old junk, mildew, and many shards. In spite of the heat Muriel shivered, horrified by the atmosphere of helpless poverty and hopeless despair hanging over this area.

Without warning she came out into a cleaner and more prosperous part of the city, where the lanes became roads and there were small, open-fronted shops selling grain, vegetables, cloth, and other necessities. Passers-by were startled by her presence, staring and whispering among themselves.

In spite of the dust, heat, and fearsome smells Muriel found the sights full of interest, because of their newness, but she

felt they would soon bore her. At a corner she came upon a large communal well built high above the road level and approached by flights to steps leading to a square platform covered with a stone roof supported by graceful arches. Going up the steps she mingled with a crowd of young women, and her unexpected appearance caused a sensation. There was much giggling and whispering, and when she smiled in a friendly manner, one or two of the younger women returned it coyly.

The stone balustrade of the well was festooned with thin, wet ropes which lowered buckets into the deep, cool depths and they rose and fell to the sound of soft splashings and chatter from the women. Watching the scene, she wished she could talk to these people and learn something of the lives they lived. A few were good-looking, and all adorned with complicated ear-rings, nose-roses and silver charms, while on their slender, brown arms were fragile glass bangles of many colours.

As she reached the road again Muriel became aware of a tall Indian with dark, glittering eyes, who was watching her as he leaned against a wall and smoked a bazaar-made cigarette. He stared at her, and when walking away she realized that he was following. This continued for some distance and she became annoyed. Turning sharply she went up to him.

"Why are you following me like this?" she demanded angrily.

The man, considerably startled, halted abruptly, and then grinning, showed a set of very bad teeth. He shrugged his shoulders under a dust-coloured shirt.

"The miss-sahib is alone," he said gruffly.

"So you do speak English," exclaimed Muriel. "What does t matter if I am alone?"

"Miss-sahibs do not walk alone in our city."

"I am quite capable of looking after myself, thank you. Please go away and leave me alone."

The man grinned again and remained where he was. Muriel nonplussed, hesitated and then walked away, deciding she had seen enough of the city for one day, besides it was becoming very hot and there was a long walk back to the bungalow. She left by the main gate and was relieved to find that the man was no longer following her.

When she reached the Willis's garden she was feeling very hot and tired, and the hair under the white topee was sticking unpleasantly to her forehead. She sat down in one of the cane chairs on the verandah and Mrs. Willis, hearing her arrive, came out and stared down sympathetically at her guest's exhausted face.

"You look very hot and tired, my dear," she said. "I told you you shouldn't have gone on your own. Walking in this hot sun isn't wise, and you'll make yourself ill if you're not careful." Hurrying into the bungalow she reappeared carrying a long glass filled with fresh lime juice and soda, with ice floating in it. "There, drink this and you will feel better."

The girl took the glass, and after expressing grateful thanks, sipped the cool pleasantness.

"I didn't realize how far it was from here to the city," she said putting down the glass. "But it was worth the walk."

"So you found it interesting. I'm so glad," announced the elder woman. "I know I should have thought it merely smelly and very hot."

"It was rather, but I felt I was in a different world." Muriel described some of the things she had seen, commenting specially on her first impressions.

Mrs. Willis shook her head and made clicking noises with her tongue.

"Yes, some of the poverty and misery here is indescribable. The people are so exploited they resemble little more than cattle. Everything goes up to the palace."

"Can't something be done about it?" asked the girl picking up her glass again. "I mean can't the government do something?"

"No, very little, I'm afraid. Peter has continually reported and pressed for reforms, but this being an Indian state the government won't interfere unless things reach a crisis."

"Are all Indian states like this one?"

"Good gracious, no. Some are extremely well run, with the people happy and reasonably prosperous. It all depends on the ruler, you see."

Muriel compressed her lips and frowned as she finished her drink.

"I'd like to tell this rajah of yours just what I think of him," she announced grimly. "And I will if I get the chance."

Mrs. Willis gasped and then laughed.

"You haven't met him yet. If you do you'll change your mind. I think he comes nearer to a human devil than anyone I've ever met."

"Then why don't they get rid of him and put a decent man in his place?"

At that moment the resident came out, and hearing Muriel's last remark, laughed as he knocked out some ash from his pipe and flung it on to the drive.

"Discussing Bogra, eh?" he observed. "The old sinner. I wish to God we could be rid of him, but he's too cunning for that. But we may catch him out one day and then there'll be drastic changes here." He leaned against a verandah support. "Did you enjoy your trip? Found it a bit warm, I expect, didn't you?"

"Yes, it was rather, although frightfully interesting. I've been telling Mrs. Willis about it, but I forgot to mention that a man followed me about for a long time."

"Oh, did he. What did you do?" The resident looked down at his guest, and his blue eyes twinkled.

"After a time I turned on him and asked why he was following me. He said it was because I was alone. I told him to go away and because he wouldn't I came back here."

"So he spoke English. I wonder who he was? He must have come from the palace, because none of the city folk speak it." Major Willis paused and refilled his pipe. "By the way, before I forget it I must warn you never to speak to, or touch a child while you are here. It is very dangerous. You see, if the child were to have a go of fever and perhaps die you would be credited with having the evil eye, and that is a most unpleasant thing to possess. Kipling tells this very plainly in his yarn, *The Return of Imray*. I think the next time you go to the city I'll come too."

Muriel was about to protest, but seeing her host shake his head she broke off and changed it to a question as to whether he thought it possible for her to visit the palace.

"I haven't been inside the place since we came here," announced Mrs. Willis, smiling. "And I must say I don't think I want to. A sin sink I call it."

The girl laughed and looked at Peter Willis, who hesitated before answering her question.

"It might be managed. I go up now and again to see the Diwan, who is not a bad old fellow, and I don't see why you shouldn't come along too. You won't see much, but at least you will get inside the gate, which will be something."

"Thank you. That will be splendid," said Muriel gratefully. "Do you often go and see the rajah himself?"

"No, very rarely. He hates the sight of me, and I don't wonder, because nearly every time I have to say something unpleasant. That isn't easy, because if I made a slip and perhaps used the wrong word he'd report me at once, and say I had blackened his face, or something of that kind."

The next three days passed without incident. The girl went twice to the city with her host, and they drove out into the dull countryside in the evenings, which was pleasant because of the cool breeze in the car. At dinner one evening Peter Willis announced he was going up to see the Diwan the following morning, and enquired if Muriel still wanted to go with him. She replied that she did, and so it was arranged for them to start at nine o'clock. They drove to the city and stopped the car at the foot of the steep roadway leading up to the palace gate because only state cars were allowed to use it.

"This rule about state cars is really only a hit in the eye for us British residents," explained Peter Willis, as they got out of the car. "See what I mean? We have to approach on foot."

"Oh, how humiliating," cried Muriel angrily. "If I'm asked to the palace I shall refuse to go unless I'm driven up."

Her companion laughed as they toiled up the very steep and winding road to the great double gateway.

"That's if you are," he said. "And I expect they'd send a palace car for you and then what would you do?"

"I don't know. I should have to think about it."

Half way up they paused for breath, and turning looked down on the mass of uneven roof tops breaking like waves at the base of the great rock, which swept down in cascades of liver-coloured stone where stunted undergrowth fought for existence.

"Are there many other places like this in India?" asked the girl as they continued the walk.

"Yes, a few. Gwalior, Jodhpur, and old Amber, have all palace-forts on hills, but they are not lived in nowadays."

When they reached the first gate, with its rough-hewn wooden door, heavily studded with spikes and iron, several unkempt soldiers were lounging beside the guardroom between the outer and inner gates. They paid little attention to Major Willis, who was well known, but stared in astonishment at the girl. They chattered together and it seemed as if they would halt the pair, but they changed their minds. The visitors passed on into a large main courtyard surrounded by high buildings with windows set well above ground level. Numerous steps led to higher levels, and at the far end the courtyard ended in a deep, arched durbar hall of red sandstone elaborately carved. Muriel was told that here Bogra held his rare public audiences.

Walking across the dusty, open space they went up several flights of steps, crossed a small, paved garden with a pool, and into a dimly lighted room where a young man was sitting at a

table studying a bunch of papers. On seeing the resident he got up and bowed, his eyes fixed on Muriel.

"The Diwan waits, Huzoor," said the man softly.

"Good. Take me to him," replied Peter Willis.

The visitors were led down several long corridors, and ushered into a large, stuffy room where the Diwan was sitting on a pile of cushions writing at a low table. He did not get up, but put down his pen and bunching his fingers placed them to his forehead and bowed from the waist. The resident returned the bow and indicated Muriel as he spoke in Urdu.

"Excellency, this is a young lady who is staying with me. She wished greatly to meet you. She has much interest in Indian life."

The old gentleman bowed again and waved a hand towards two chairs which had been brought forward by the young man, who now left the room.

"I am honoured above all that she should come to see me, sahib," replied the Diwan gravely. "Does she speak our language?"

"No, Diwan. She has but newly come to this country." The resident turned to Muriel and told her what had been said.

"What do I say to him?" she asked.

"Oh, enquire after his health." He turned to the minister again. "My friend hopes your health is of the best."

"Tell her it is good and I think she is beautiful to look upon, and is also clever."

Peter Willis translated this, his face perfectly solemn, and went on to explain that his companion would have to sit and wait while he talked business. Muriel nodded, and leaning back in her chair watched the old gentleman. She thought what a fine face he had, with his great white beard brushed back, his faded eyes, and aristocratic features. How grave and dignified he was as he listened and replied. She then looked round the room and noted the simplicity of the furnishings, but was fascinated by the horror of a Victorian type of stained glass in a window facing her.

Ten minutes passed, and Major Willis was concluding his talk, when a dramatic incident took place. The curtain hanging before the only door was pulled aside and Bogra stalked into the room. For a long moment everyone turned and stared at him. The Diwan then scrambled to his feet in a state of agitation and the resident pushed back his chair and got to his feet, with Muriel following his example.

Bogra, dressed in a long, tight brocaded coat of blue satin, with a flat, tightly-rolled blue pugri set aslant on his oiled hair, stood near the door with a hand resting on the hilt of a short sword hanging at his side. He glanced first at Major Willis and then stared hard at Muriel. The resident promptly took charge of the situation and beckoned the girl to come forward.

"Good morning, Your Highness," he said in English. "May I introduce Miss Burdon who is staying with us."

Bogra was about to bow, but changing his mind, stepped forward and held out his hand.

"Good morning, Miss Burdon," he said, staring fixedly at her. "I am glad to meet you."

Muriel shook hands, withdrawing her own as quickly as possible.

"How do you do, Your Highness," she said smiling. "I asked Major Willis to bring me to your palace because I wanted to see it so much."

Bogra nodded, smiled faintly, and turning spoke quickly to his minister, who was standing with bent shoulders. While this was taking place the girl quickly summed up the prince. She saw the fat, sagging face, the dark, rough skin and unpleasant eyes. Yes, it was clear what she had heard about this man was not exaggerated. He was dangerous. Dealing with him would be like making a fuss of a fully grown tiger between the bars of its cage. Her task was going to be far more difficult than she thought.

Bogra, having listened to the Diwan's reply, turned and addressed the resident in Urdu.

"His Highness has asked us to have coffee with him before we go," said Major Willis, smiling.

"Thank you very much," answered the girl quickly. "I should like to."

"Good. Come."

Bogra turned on his heel, made for the door, and held aside the curtain for Muriel. He followed her, leaving Peter Willis to catch the curtain ; the resident grinned to himself as he went after the prince's fat, rather hunched shoulders. Things were beginning to move and he wondered what would happen next. It was clear the girl's presence had become known instantly in the palace, hence Bogra's sudden appearance.

In a heavy, ornate reception room the visitors were seated side by side on a hard, velvet-covered couch, while Bogra used a pile of cushions. Three servants brought in fruit, black coffee, and several bottles of violently coloured mineral water. Muriel

and her companion accepted coffee, but the prince took up a mango and started to eat it in a messy fashion. He stared at the girl with expressionless eyes so that she had to brace herself not to show signs of the embarrassment she felt.

Wiping his hands on a linen cloth, Bogra belched and proceeded to ask the girl many questions in English, to which she replied easily and frankly. He paid no attention whatsoever to Peter Willis who sat and listened, and was vastly intrigued. Half an hour passed and the resident got to his feet, saying they must be going because it was growing late.

When they got back to the bungalow and told Mrs. Willis what had happened, she was at first amazed and then worried.

"What does it mean, Peter?" she enquired as they sat down to lunch.

"I dunno," he replied easily. "I expect we shall be asked to the palace."

Giving his wife a warning look he changed the subject until the servants had finally left the room. Even then he got up from his chair and opened the door to see that no one was listening behind it.

"What did you think of him?" asked Mrs. Willis, as her husband came back and sat down.

"Not very much, I'm afraid. I saw at once what you meant when you said he was dangerous," replied Muriel thoughtfully. "It was his eyes that impressed me more than anything else. Once or twice, when I was watching him, I thought they looked hardly human. They made me want to shiver."

"Yes, I've often felt like that when speaking to him," declared Mrs. Willis. "What did you talk about?"

"He asked me lots of questions. Why I came out, where I lived at home, and where I had been out here. He seemed interested when I said I was keen about getting to know all I could about Indian life and customs. He asked me if I were going to write a book, if I were married, and what my father was; in fact I did little else but answer his stream of questions, didn't I Major Willis?"

"Yes, the old devil seemed frightfully keen on knowing all about you. I think you played up very well indeed, and I was glad to see you put in lots of highnesses. He loves that."

"I wasn't rude or abrupt, was I?"

"No, of course not, but I think from your manner you made him realize you weren't the same type of young woman that Maddabad had staying with him."

The elder woman, who was still looking anxious, continued to ply her guest with questions as if she were bent on reassuring herself in some obscure manner. During a pause Muriel turned to her host and enquired if there were a ranee and a harem in the palace.

"Yes, there's a ranee all right, but we never see her because the zenana is as closely guarded as a prison. It is zenana, you know, because Bogra's a Hindu. Harems are only for Mahommedans."

Mrs. Willis now rather wearily pushed back her chair and everyone went off for the usual afternoon rest. Just before tea-time Muriel was sitting in the lounge alone when Peter Willis came in and suggested they should go to his study for a few minutes.

"Now look here, young woman," he began as the girl sat down beside his desk. "I want to know what you really felt about this morning. There's no doubt you've caught Bogra's eye all right. Do you still mean to carry out this mad idea of yours now that you have seen what he is like?"

"Yes, of course I do," she replied instantly.

Peter Willis compressed his lips, and very serious, shook his head.

"I really don't see how I can let you do it, and I'm getting a bit het up over it. I didn't take you seriously at first. For one thing I never imagined you would meet him in person, and secondly, if you did you would have steered clear of him after one look." A comical gleam on his face, he looked down at the girl sitting with crossed legs in her silk, flowered dress. She was so English and sane. She and Bogra were like the maiden and the dragon. The whole thing was preposterous. He sighed and again shook his head. "Well, we must wait and see what happens. It's no good trying to guess what he may do."

CHAPTER XI

WHILE the Willis household waited for further developments, which everyone was sure would be forthcoming, Bogra had been busy. The result was a large, square envelope addressed to Muriel, sealed with a blob of official sealing wax, and brought by a member of the palace staff, who waited for an answer. The butler gave the letter to his master, who sought out his guest and

handed it to her in silence. Turning it over she stared down at the careful writing and then ripped open the letter and read it.

"To the Honourable and Highly Respected Miss Burdon, staying in the house of Willis sahib, from the Ranee Meran in the palace at Lingam, who sends greetings and hopes that the Honourable Misses health is of the best.

"The Ranee Meran has heard of Miss Burdon's staying and that her heart is soft towards Indian peoples. She desires the Miss should come to the zenana to talk with open hearts on many things. The Ranee Meran hopes the Miss will come exactly at five o'clock at night of the day of this letter.

"The Ranee Meran ever prays for the long life and the gifts of many sons to the Illustrious Miss Burdon.

"Written for the Gracious Ranee Meran in the Palace at Lingam by Ramji, secretary to His Highness the Rajah of Bogra."

Muriel gave the letter to Peter Willis and watched his face as he read it. Lowering the scented paper he took the pipe from his mouth and laughed heartily.

"So that's his game, is it? Deuced clever," he exclaimed, still chuckling. "He must have learned a thing or two while he was in Maddashah."

"What do you mean?" asked the girl frowning. "I don't understand."

"Well you see, Bogra has got the ranee to write this letter so that you will go alone to the palace, and he doesn't have to ask either my wife or myself."

"Yes, of course. How stupid of me. It was rather bright of him."

"I suppose you're going?"

"Most certainly I am."

"All right, but if you are not back by ten o'clock I shall come after you, Bogra or no Bogra." Peter Willis grinned and caught her arm. "Come on. We'll go into my study and write the answer, because the fellow is waiting to take it back. I'll tell you what to say."

A quarter of an hour later a suitable flowery letter of acceptance had been prepared, and together they went out on to the verandah to give it to the waiting official. The man, tall and dignified, who had been sitting on his haunches, now got up and salaamed deeply. He took the letter and then looked keenly at Muriel. Using English he spoke in low, clear tones.

"She who sits in Delhi knows what befalls. She sends greetings. She says beware of the tiger's claws, which are long and sharp."

The man salaamed swiftly, turned, and was gone leaving the pair on the verandah to stare after him in amazement.

"Well I'm damned," cried Peter Willis. "What do you think of that? How quickly news does travel in this country."

Before the girl could reply Mrs. Willis came out and enquired what was going on. When she grasped the situation she turned and caught her husband's arm.

"You mustn't let her go, Peter," she said urgently. "If she does I know something frightful will happen."

"She'll be all right, Amy," he replied reassuringly. "I wouldn't dream of allowing her to go if I didn't think it would be safe. After all she is only going to the zenana."

"Oh, I do so wish you wouldn't go," continued Mrs. Willis, turning to the girl. "I shall be dreadfully worried while you are there."

"It will be perfectly all right, Mrs. Willis. You know I'm not a child and can look after myself. Besides this chance to see the inside of a zenana is too good to be missed."

The elder woman looked from one to the other, and seeing her pleading was of no avail went back into the bungalow.

At a quarter to five that afternoon Muriel was dressed and ready for her visit. She wore her best dress, a creation in black and white bought in London for just such an occasion as this. Her hat was little more than a bunch of white flowers touched with red and set well forward and aslant on her fair hair.

"I say, dressed as for Ascot," observed Peter Willis, when they met in the lounge. "I hope they appreciate it up there."

"I don't mind if they do or not," replied the girl, smiling. "I've put on these clothes to buoy up my courage. Women can face almost anything in smart clothes, and when they know they're looking their best."

"Yes, I think I understand. Well, I suppose I'd better go and get the car. This time I'm going to drive you right up into the palace, and be damned to him. Also I have a good mind to wait there for you to come out."

As he spoke they both caught sight of a huge blue and silver limousine, which slid to a halt before the steps of the verandah. Major Willis laughed and flung open the french windows.

"So a car has been sent for you. I thought it might and so didn't bother about mine until now. Ah, there you are, my dear."

He turned and put an arm round his wife's waist as she came out and stood beside him.

"So you're going after all," she said quietly. "You are looking very smart I must say." She sighed and held out a hand. "I hope you enjoy yourself, but take this just in case. I generally keep it near at hand." She pressed a tiny automatic into Muriel's hand. "Just slip it into your bag. It will help me not to worry so much."

The girl, after a moment's hesitation, put the weapon into her bag and smiled her thanks. All three then turned and stared down at the waiting car, which was a purdah one, with dark blue windows. Muriel led the way down the steps, and as she did so the driver flung open the rear door. It was the same man who had brought the letter earlier in the day, but he gave no sign of recognition.

Looking into the car over the girl's shoulder Peter Willis saw a small Indian woman, wearing a three-quarter veil, sitting well back in the far corner. He softly whistled his surprise. Bogra was doing things as they should be done, and this reassured him. He helped Muriel into the car and gently pressed her arm.

"Good luck," he said. "And don't be late for goodness sake."

"I won't. And please don't worry, either of you." She sat and waved a hand to her hostess as the door closed.

As soon as the car was moving the woman in the corner unfastened her veil and smiled in a ravishing manner. Muriel looked at her and gasped. She was the most beautiful young creature she had seen. The face, framed in satin-smooth black hair, parted in the middle, and drawn back behind the ears, was a perfect oval, with the olive clear skin of a Southern European. Every feature was perfect, from the straight little nose, the rosebud mouth, and level, plucked eyebrows. Her eyes were enormous, resembling those of a deer. Muriel glanced at the tiny, delicious hands resting on her lap, with their reddened nails and hennaed palms.

"How do you do. You are surprised?" The woman laughed, and Muriel thought the sound like tinkling water.

"Yes, I am, rather."

"Why are you surprised?"

"You are so very beautiful. I have never seen anyone so lovely."

"You are very kind," replied the woman demurely. "You also have good looks; more than many English girls I have met

I have come to take you to the palace. She sent me because I can speak English."

Muriel nodded, and smiled, and asked her companion's name.

"I am Paperta. My husband is dead, and because I am a widow I live with my mother-in-law, whose husband is a minister in the palace."

Muriel nodded and then asked why she spoke such good English.

"Ah hi! When I married, my husband was a much-loved elder son. His father was a great landowner in Oudh. My husband went to your country and to a great school, also to Oxford University. He loved your country and later I went with him. I also love it, and learned quickly to speak English. It was not difficult." The little woman put out a hand and touched Muriel's dress with a caressing touch. "That is very pretty and very nice. It came from Paris? Ah ho, how well I know Paris."

"No, it came from London." Muriel mentioned a well-known house.

The girl clapped her hands and gave a little cry of pleasure.

"Ah, ha, I know it. It is in—in—. Yes, it is in Bond Street. How happy I feel to speak again of these things. So long I have been like a bird in a cage." The small face saddened like a sorrowing child. "Never shall I leave this place again. Sometimes I think I shall die of boredom."

"But you will remarry and go out into the world again," exclaimed Muriel.

"No. No it is not possible. We are Hindus, and Hindu widows may not marry again."

"Oh," replied Muriel blankly. "I'm sorry."

"My husband, he was killed in a flying machine. It was very sad. I would have gone with him, but something inside me." She touched her breast. "It say do not go. I tell him not to go, but he said I was a silly girl. He called me Chilli Bim Bim. I do not know what that means but he always said when he make love to me that I was his little Chilli Bim Bim."

Paperta lowered her head and cried softly into her sari and Muriel, not knowing what to say, made sympathetic noises and patted her companion's hand.

The car was now breasting the slope to the palace and soon it swept into the courtyard and drew up before the durbar hall. Paperta having dried her tears, refastened her veil and as the door was flung open she hurried out, closely followed by Muriel. She caught her companion's arm and with quick little steps scurried across the cool interior to a door at the rear. This led

into a dimly lighted room where several soldiers stood on guard. The couple passed on through another door into a courtyard in which was a long pool and a few flower beds. On all four sides were deep verandahs supported by graceful arches of carved red sandstone. Above, white marble walls were pierced by many windows.

Halfway down the right side they entered a narrow doorway and went up a winding staircase with very low, broad steps. This led on to a long, enclosed verandah overlooking the courtyard, and off it were various curtained rooms. At the far end Muriel was taken into an inner room which opened out into a much larger one with several windows and balconies, and was set in the walls of the palace overlooking the far side of the rock and the distant, pale-yellow countryside.

Standing beside one of the windows was the Ranee Meran, a daughter of a prince in the far south. She was surrounded by several attendants wearing brightly coloured silks and delicately coloured saries, and hung about with crude gold and silver jewellery. When Muriel appeared everyone turned and looked at her with deep interest. Hurrying forward, Paperta made a quick little bow to the ranee and then introduced Muriel, who smiled and held out her hand. The attendants, having drawn back, she saw her hostess was a medium-sized woman who had once been beautiful. Her face had grown lined and sagged, and it was obvious that she looked much older than she was. Her eyes held the girl's attention, being large and soft, and in them was the look of a spaniel that has been severely chided for some misdeed. In a hesitating manner she held out a hand and then smiled, and it changed her expression to one of pleasant animation.

The conversation that followed took place in a dialect translated by Paperta.

"My heart is soft that you should come and see me," said the ranee, waving a hand towards a great pile of cushions, placed so that a clear view over a balcony could be had. "Please sit and we will talk."

Muriel sat down and tucked her legs under her skirt, while her hostess placed herself on the right, and the women began to scurry in and out of the room, bringing refreshments which were placed on low tables. There were bowls of assorted fruits, milk, mineral waters, and innumerable sweets, mostly very soft and sticky, and violently coloured. Paperta seated herself slightly behind so that she was able to translate with the minimum of effort.

"I have heard many tales of your people," announced the ranee. "I have never spoken to one, because here we live cut off from all Hindustan."

"Haven't you met Willis memsahib?" exclaimed Muriel, accepting one of the less sticky sweets.

The woman shook her head and sighed

"No. My husband and Willis sahib do not love each other. I know. It is sad it should be so. It is the will of the gods." She shrugged her shoulders and smiled a little pathetically. "I have lived in this zenana since I was married and have never left it." Wrinkling her forehead she counted on her fingers. "Yes, eighteen years have passed since I left the south. I am now an old woman of no account."

Muriel energetically denied this, paying her hostess a few flowery compliments, as she had been instructed to do by Major Willis. The ranee laughed and shook her head.

"You have a pretty turn of speech and my heart warms to the flattery," she said, and looked at her guest with a puzzled expression. "You are not married. It is strange. Is there no man in your life? Has the wine of love been denied to you?"

Paperta giggled as she translated this, but was frozen by a look from the ranee. Muriel flushed and shook her head. The ranee was too polite to show she did not believe this, and adroitly turned the conversation to asking questions about European food, dress, behaviour, and, finally, love-making.

"Paperta has told me many wondrous tales of the nautch (dance), and great feasts, where women and men are equal and treated as one. She says young girls are held in the arms of handsome men, newly met. They walk to and fro on the floor as if already on the marriage bed. It is a great shamelessness. Do they also sit in dark corners and the men whisper words of love? Do not the husbands and the father become enraged and beat them severely, as they well deserve?"

Muriel laughed heartily when this was translated.

"No, it is our custom. All girls do it, and there is no harm," she answered quickly.

"No harm! Bapri Bap! They are entirely lacking in modesty. They are as animals," cried the scandalized ranee. "If it truly be thus then no man can be sure he is the father of his son."

This became too much for Muriel's composure and she looked appealingly at Paperta and asked if she might be shown the quarters in the zenana. The ranee, on learning of this request,

clapped her hands and scrambled to her feet, pleased as a child about to exhibit a new toy.

Leading the way on to the verandah the ranee took her guest on a tour of the apartments. There were many small reception rooms, bedrooms, narrow passages, tiny open courtyards, and a long room overlooking the main courtyard where a pierced marble screen allowed the inmates of the zenana to watch durbars and ceremonies taking place below. Muriel was even shown the bathrooms, dug out of the rock, where dark stairs led down to the dim, tiny, stuffy cubby-holes. The baths consisted of a square hollow in the floor with an outlet pipe, a narrow seat cut in the walls, and a niche for a light. They were now lighted by electricity, but even so, the girl could not help feeling they unpleasantly resembled prison cells.

In the living rooms, what impressed Muriel more than anything else, was the stuffy ornateness of the red plush and lavish gilt, set off by quantities of cheap, stained glass. On the way back to the first reception room Muriel glanced at her wrist watch and turning to Paperta announced that she must be leaving. This was repeated to the ranee, who bowed slightly and her expression saddened. Without warning she stepped forward and embraced the girl with sincere warmth.

"The ranee says she would have you stay here many days," said Paperta quickly. "She says you have lightened her heart, and your going leaves her in darkness. She asks that you will return. Tomorrow is our lord's birthday and there will be a small durbar and entertainment. We shall watch it. Will you come also?"

Muriel returned the ranee's embrace and then gently broke away.

"Yes, tell her I should like to very much," she said. "Say also I have enjoyed myself and shall look forward to coming again."

"Good, very good. Please go," said the ranee. Turning away abruptly she hurried into an adjoining room, leaving Paperta to lead Muriel down to the courtyard where the car was waiting.

On the return journey Muriel turned impulsively to her companion and caught one of her hands.

"I like you very much, and I hope we shall be friends," she said, her natural reserve weakened by the recent events.

"That is very kind. I also hope we shall be friends," replied the woman sincerely. "You are very good. Your coming to the zenana has given much pleasure. So little happens, and there is

so little to talk about. Now everyone will chatter for days, and it will relieve our boredom."

"I am glad, and I did so enjoy everything. What time shall I be ready tomorrow? Will they send a car for me?"

Paperta looked distressed for a moment.

"I do not know the time, but it will be in the evening. I will send you a letter tomorrow morning very early so you will know in plenty of time."

On reaching the bungalow Muriel asked her companion to come in and meet her hosts, but she refused.

"I should like to, but it is not allowed. If he heard, there might be much trouble. I must not risk making him angry."

"You mean the rajah?"

Paperta nodded and her eyes clouded.

"He is not a very good man. We are much afraid of him. Good-night. I will send the letter early in the morning."

Muriel said good-bye, slipped out of the car, and ran up the steps, from where she watched it drive off at once. Hurrying into the bungalow, she burst in on the Willis's who were still at dinner.

"So you're back, safe and sound. And early too," exclaimed Peter Willis, rising to his feet.

"Yes, and I had a perfectly wonderful time." Muriel pulled out her chair and sat down at the table, putting her handbag and gloves on the floor beside the chair as the resident sat down again.

"Will you have dinner?" asked Mrs. Willis, smiling. "As you see we've nearly finished, but I told the cook to keep some for you."

"Oh, thank you."

While she ate the girl told of her experiences, and her hosts listened to vivid and animated descriptions.

"I'm very glad indeed," said Amy Willis, when Muriel broke off. "You do seem to have enjoyed yourself. Did you see him?"

"No, I didn't. And I think the ranee only mentioned him once. I'm going again tomorrow evening, you know. She asked me just as I was leaving. It's the rajah's birthday and there is to be some kind of party and I am to watch it."

"Oh, I hadn't heard about it." The resident leaned forward. "They don't often have durbars of any kind up there. I wonder if it's for your benefit?"

"Why should it be?" replied Muriel, surprised. "It must have been arranged beforehand because the ranee never left us, and she seemed to know all about it."

"Hmm, I see. Well there it is." Peter Willis stirred his coffee reflectively. "I suppose it's all right. I'm interested to hear about this woman, Paperta. I remember her husband being killed in a flying accident some years ago. He was a good fellow. I met him once at a dinner in London, but I don't remember meeting, or hearing about her. I should like to meet her."

"Yes, she's charming and speaks English well. I asked her to come in and meet you both, but she said she couldn't."

"I can understand that. If she offended Bogra she'd be in for a bad time."

When they left the dining room Amy Willis and Muriel sat in the lounge, while Peter Willis went to his study to finish off some work.

"You know, my dear, there's something about you I don't understand," announced the elder woman, when they were alone. "What really made you come out here like this and take such an interest in Indian life? Are you thinking of writing a book, or something of that kind? It seems so odd that, living all your life in a small village at home, you should suddenly do a thing like this."

"Yes, I suppose it does sound rather strange," answered the girl slowly. "As a matter of fact I had a very good reason indeed for coming out here, and I will tell you why, perhaps very soon now. At the moment it is a secret but it isn't anything to do with writing a book, and something much more important."

Mrs. Willis nodded as if this confirmed her suspicions. She then changed the conversation, being afraid she might be tempted to press her guest to reveal the secret.

The following morning, when Muriel was about to write a letter, the butler approached and gave her an envelope and said a man was waiting to speak to her on the drive. Ripping open the letter she saw it was from Paperta who said the party was to begin at seven o'clock and that a car would arrive about half past six. Going out on to the verandah Muriel saw the man who had brought the first letter from the palace. He hurried up the steps and salaamed.

"I will come with the car this evening," he said, glancing about to see that no one was within earshot. "The miss-sahib will be ready?"

"Yes, I shall be waiting for you."

"Good. The Lady Paperta is known to her in Delhi. She is to be trusted. It would be good if the miss-sahib opened her heart to the Lady Paperta. The miss-sahib understands?"

"Yes. Thank you for telling me," answered Muriel quietly. "Please tell Shahmeeran that I think I may be able to find out something very soon now."

The man started and held up a brown hand in urgent warning.

"No. Her name must not be mentioned in this place," he said hoarsely. "It is very dangerous. Do not speak it, even to the Lady Paperta."

"Oh, in that case I won't. I will remember and be careful."

The man smiled, nodded, and turning about, hurried away.

When the car arrived at a quarter to seven Muriel was ready wearing evening dress and a light scarf over her head. Peter Willis escorted her down the steps and saw that this time there was no one else in the car. A sudden spasm of anxiety caused him to catch her arm as she was stepping inside.

"Don't be later than you can help," he said. "I'll wait up for you. Enjoy yourself, but be on your guard. You've still got what Amy gave you, I hope?"

Muriel laughed as she sat down in the car.

"Yes, it's in here, all right." She patted her handbag. "But I don't think I should know how to use it even if I had to. Good-bye. Don't worry. I shall be perfectly all right, like I was last time."

The car sped through the hot, airless evening, but as they climbed the steep slope to the palace a fresh breeze came in through the lowered windows. In the main courtyard Muriel received a surprise that was almost a shock. The whole area was brilliantly lit by hundreds of small electric bulbs strung from side to side, and draped in festoons from windows and terraces, while the durbar hall blazed like a diamond ornament. On three sides of the yard a dense mass of people was held back near the walls by rough, stout palings, leaving an ample arena down which the girl was driven.

The car slid to a halt before the steps leading to a small throne placed in the centre arch supporting the front of the hall. The door was opened for her, not by the driver, but the Diwan, who bowed low and waved a claw-like hand towards the steps. Smiling her thanks she stepped out, walked composedly up the steps, and pausing at the top, looked round. The crowd, which had grown silent on the approach of the car, now broke out into an excited chattering which sounded like wind across tree tops. All the girl was able to distinguish were lines of closely packed heads and shoulders, broken now and again by the violence of some crudely dyed shawl, or scarf.

Behind her in the hall, crowds of officials and courtiers hurried to and fro in what seemed to be aimless confusion, and there was much giving of orders and counter-orders. Beside the throne on the right stood a large gilt armchair, upholstered in crimson velvet, and Muriel guessed this was for her use. She was sorry, because she would much rather have been with the women, who she knew must be in the long room above. The Diwan stood nearby, and as neither could speak to the other, he smiled each time the girl looked in his direction, and she returned it.

The courtiers suddenly became increasingly agitated, hurrying to form a wide lane before a rear door. Muriel watched and smiled to herself, the spectacle reminding her of a party of village school children lining up to receive Father Christmas in Strattonfield. A pause and sudden hush followed. Through the door came Bogra, a glittering resplendent figure. He wore a long coat of amber-coloured brocade and a pugri of pale blue, while about his waist was a broad gold belt, from which hung a long ceremonial sword.

Muriel stared at him in fascination because he was, as she described it afterwards, an animated jeweller's shop. There was a vast diamond ornament pinned on the front of the pugri, several strings of large pearls round his neck, and all over his ample breast jewels of many kinds were stuck as if someone had flung them at him. Even his golden slippers sparkled below heavy gold anklets.

With quick steps he came towards the throne, and nearing it his dark eyes lighted up as he saw Muriel. Bowing slightly, he smiled, and indicated the chair. She moved towards it but tactfully did not sit down until Bogra was on his throne ; a fact that did not pass unnoticed by those who now closed in round the pair. Bogra fingered his tight, high collar and then leaned over and spoke quietly to the girl.

"I am very glad you have come. It is my birthday. I am happy you are here."

"I am greatly honoured, Your Highness," replied Muriel, looking down at the handbag resting in her lap. She then glanced up. "I am also surprised, because the ranee asked me to come and I thought I should be with her."

"Ah no, Miss Burdon. It is better you are here. I can talk with you. I think you are beautiful. You make me think nice thoughts."

Muriel smiled noncommittally and then admired the decorations. The court, having gathered about the rear of the throne,

the durbar began. It opened with a long string of relations and courtiers approaching the foot of the steps, salaaming, and saying a few words of greeting. Bogra paid scant attention, nodding briefly to each, and continuing to talk to Muriel, who would much rather have been left alone to watch the procession. Then came the entertainment, with bevies of dancing girls, boy singers, tumblers, acrobats, mock sword fights, and two court jesters, who managed to make even Bogra smile at their cross-talk.

The girl was fascinated by the various turns, each with its background of shrill, wailing, even screeching music made by a band of musicians on the left of the arena. It was towards the end of the first portion of the durbar that an unfortunate incident occurred. A solo dancer, young and pretty, wearing only breast shields and a full skirt on which had been sewn hundreds of small pieces of broken mirror, was performing a whirling dance. Suddenly she tripped and fell heavily on to the sanded ground. She gave a sharp little cry of pain and Muriel sat upright in her chair. She glanced at Bogra, who had seen the accident, and his expression made her shiver. His features were momentarily distorted by anger, his thick lips drew back, and his eyes glittered. Without pausing to consider her action Muriel got up, ran down the steps and bent over the dancer, who was lying on her side moaning faintly. She was about to pick up the girl when two attendants dashed on to the scene, and catching the dancer by one of her arms began to drag her roughly to her feet. Muriel lost her temper.

"Don't do that," she ordered, pushing the men aside. "Can't you see she has hurt herself?"

The astonished men, not understanding what had been said, hesitated and looked towards the throne. Muriel bent down, caught up the girl in her arms, and staggered up the steps.

"She has hurt herself badly," she announced coldly to Bogra. "Perhaps Your Highness will give orders that she is properly looked after?"

Bogra forced a smile to his lips, turned his head, and said something to an official. The man came forward and took the dancer from Muriel and carried her to the rear.

"She was a clumsy fool, Miss Burdon," remarked Bogra, still smiling in what he thought was a pleasant manner. "Dancing girls who cannot dance must be punished. It is nothing."

Muriel bit back a sharp reply, and compressing her lips sat down. Bogra looked at her set face and shrugged his shoulders, while the courtiers whispered excitedly among themselves.

A few more turns took place, until the prince waved his hand impatiently and gave a sharp order.

"We shall now have the fireworks, Miss Burdon," he announced. "You think them nice?"

"Yes, Your Highness, I do like them," she replied vaguely.

She was still upset by the callous behaviour towards the dancing girl, and, in addition to this, she was considering how she could manage to talk to Paperta alone. The sooner she knew about Clive the better it would be. Perhaps an opportunity might occur after the party was finished.

At the far end of the courtyard, near the main gate, men began to run to and fro carrying large tubs, boxes, and bundles, and without warning all the lights were switched off. The firework display began with rockets of all kinds, then came set pieces and the usual waterfalls of golden rain. A crude representation of what Muriel supposed was Bogra had been just lighted when something went wrong. All the remaining fireworks seemed to go off together, an astonishing and noisy spectacle, with squibs and candles darting and hissing madly in all directions. At one moment the crowd roared with delight, and the next yelled with apprehension as a firework made for it. Muriel laughed until tears stood in her eyes, especially when a somewhat plump man charged down the courtyard with a rocket hunting him as if it were doing it on purpose. The disturbance soon died away, the lights were put on again and the durbar was over.

"We will have refreshments, Miss Burdon," announced Bogra, made jovial by the firework incident.

Muriel glanced at her wrist watch and saw it was half past nine. It was not late enough for her to refuse the invitation, and she smilingly accepted. Bogra led the way to the rear and into the outer reception rooms of his private apartments. In a small room, furnished with deep divans and many tables, he gave an order to a servant and turned to his guest.

"I take off these clothes. They are not comfortable," he said fingering his coat. "Please wait. The woman, Paperta will come."

He left the room by a far door and the girl sat down on a divan. A few minutes later Paperta appeared and they greeted each other warmly. Sitting down beside Muriel she discussed the durbar until her companion leaned forward and spoke quietly.

"I want to talk to you alone about something very important," she said earnestly. "It concerns she who lives in Delhi. You understand?"

Paperta started violently, glanced about nervously and then held up a warning finger.

"Yes. I understand." Her voice was hardly above a whisper. "We must be very, very careful. It is very dangerous. I must think. Do not speak."

Muriel nodded and watched her companion, who was trying to think of some means whereby they could be alone without fear of interruption. Suddenly she nodded and smiled.

"I have found the answer. It will be simple. You shall stay here tonight and sleep in my room. Then we can be alone and can talk."

"Oh, but what are we to say to him?" enquired Muriel doubtfully. "And what about Major Willis? He will be expecting me back."

"You can say you are very tired and I have asked you to stay. He will not mind, I am sure. He likes you." Paperta made a comical grimace. "If it is all right you can send a little letter to Major Willis. You will say you will return tomorrow morning."

Before anything more could be said Bogra returned, dressed in a simple white coat and a loosely wound pugri. He had discarded his finery and was smoking a long thin cheroot. Paperta at once got to her feet and bowed.

"You are permitted to remain," he said in Urdu. "Sit."

The woman obeyed, but his time went to a nearby divan where she kept her eyes lowered towards the floor. Servants now brought in the usual fruit, cakes, sweets and mineral waters, but in addition was a golden ewer and two amber-coloured glasses on a tray and placed near Bogra.

Muriel now experienced a sense of reaction, and in spite of the ceiling fan, found the atmosphere of the room stuffy and depressing. She watched Bogra walk restlessly about the floor, taking up a sweet, or a piece of fruit, and she wondered what he was thinking; probably something unpleasant. As if he had suddenly made up his mind he stopped, bent over the ewer and poured out two glasses of a rich, golden wine. Taking up the glasses he went across to Muriel and offered one to her.

"It is your custom to drink wine when you offer good wishes," he said smiling. "It is my birthday. You will drink and wish me good health?"

Muriel, having accepted the wine, lifted her glass and spoke over the rim.

"To Your Highness' long life and good health," she said, and sipped the wine, which tasted like a fine sauterne.

"Good. Well said." With glittering eyes Bogra stared down at the girl. "You must drink it all, as we do." He drained his glass and turned it upside down. "You think the wine is nice?"

"Yes, it is very good, thank you." Muriel took another and longer sip from her glass. Putting it down she smiled. "It is not polite for women to drink their wine like men," she observed. "Besides it would make me cough and I should not appreciate the taste."

Bogra nodded and sat down on the same divan as the girl who slightly drew away. She glanced across at Paperta, sitting with downcast eyes, and noticed her hands were moving restlessly in her lap. Bogra then leaned across and took up Muriel's glass and gave it to her.

"Perhaps you are tired? Drink some more and you will feel very nice."

The girl drank a little and then realized the wine had probably been tampered with, and that this was why she was being pressed to drink it. Its effect upon her was also beginning to become manifest, but instead of making her intoxicated as had been intended, it merely stimulated her brain so that she suddenly felt unusually alert and clear-headed. Here was an opportunity she must grasp, but not too quickly. The man beside her edged a little closer staring intently at her white throat and bare arms.

"You wear no jewels," he said thickly. "Is this because you have none?"

"Oh no, Your Highness. Young women in England do not wear many jewels. Perhaps a string of small pearls and a ring, but that is about all."

"Ah, do you like pearls, Miss Burdon?"

"Yes, I love them. Your Highness was wearing some magnificent ones this evening."

Bogra hesitated, and then smiled in what he hoped was a fascinating manner.

"You must let me show you my treasure rooms. There are many nice things there."

"I should like to see them very much," replied Muriel quickly, and afraid the offer might be made at that moment. She put a hand to her forehead and sighed. "Your wine is very heavy, Your Highness. I am not feeling very well. I think I should like to lie down." She got to her feet, pretending she was feeling dizzy. Paperta had also got up and was staring at Muriel with consternation she could not hide. "Please take me to your

room, Paperta," continued the girl. She turned to Bogra. "I am so sorry. I expect I shall feel better, and then I should be going home, you know."

Before Bogra could recover from his surprise at this new development, Muriel went across and caught Paperta by the arm. The two women went out of the nearest door leaving Bogra to stare after them with an expression in which anger and uncertainty fought for dominance.

As soon as the curtain before the door had swung back and the pair were hurrying down a narrow passage, Muriel squeezed her companion's arm and laughed softly.

"Didn't I manage that well?" she said. "Now we shall be able to talk in peace."

"Oh, so you are not feeling ill?" gasped Paperta. "I know he put something into the wine. I was very afraid."

"Yes, I knew it too, but it merely made me feel very much awake. Wasn't that lucky?"

The woman fervently agreed it was and in a few minutes they entered an inner room, beyond which was another with a small balcony overlooking the main courtyard. The light in the first room was switched on, but the pair went straight out on to the balcony where they sat down on two cushions snatched up in passing by Paperta.

"We must be swift," said the woman. "He may send, or even come himself. Here we can talk and no one will hear us. I must watch. He may creep in to listen. I know him." She turned on her cushion so that she had a clear view of the inner room. "Now please tell me. What do you want to say?"

With her brain working clearly and quickly Muriel gave a brief outline of her story, and Paperta listened intently, her eyes growing even larger in their astonishment as the tale proceeded. Every now and again she gave little gasps and stifled exclamations, especially when Muriel told of Shahmeeran's interest.

"So you see I am quite certain Bogra knows where Mr. Penn is," said Muriel as she came to the end of the narrative. "What do you think?"

"I do not know. It is so strange. I must think." A long pause followed until Paperta shook her head. "If he has got your friend I am quite sure he is not here in the palace. Everything that happens is soon known in the zenana. We might not know exactly what it was, but we should know something was happening." She again shook her head. "Yes, it is sure. If he

were in this place we should know. All of it could not be kept secret."

"If he isn't here, then where is he?" exclaimed Muriel.

"Oh, please talk quietly," urged the woman. "It is so dangerous I am quite faint with fear."

Another silence followed while Paperta tried to get the situation clear in her mind. Muriel, feeling extraordinarily exhilarated watched her. Paperta then smiled and nodded again.

"I do not understand it all," she said softly. "If she in Delhi were not quite sure I would say he has not got your friend. He is a bad man. He could do awful things, but there was much trouble about two Englishmen. He was much angered, but we laughed in the zenana."

"Yes, but where can Mr. Penn be if he isn't here?" enquired Muriel, beginning to lose hope that her companion would be able to help.

"There is one thing we do not understand," said Paperta as an idea occurred to her. "It has been much spoken of in the zenana. He has gone three times to the lake in his motor car. We do not know why. Before he has only gone when there is a party to shoot the duck. He goes only in the early morning, returning very soon. He went only two days ago."

"Oh, that is interesting," said Muriel eagerly. "Major Willis wanted to drive me out to it but the road is closed and we couldn't go."

"Ah ho, if that is so, how does he get there?" Paperta looked puzzled. "That is indeed strange. Perhaps your friend is there and he does not want anyone to know it."

"Is there anywhere to live out there? I mean, are there any houses or things of that sort?"

"Oh, yes. There is a small durbar hall, and many small bungalows, because in the old days the princes went to stay there in the hot weather. Now no one stays there. I have never been, but I have heard."

"So you think Mr. Penn may be kept there?"

"Oh, no. I do not know. How can I? I said he goes there and we do not know why."

"How long has Bogra been going out there?"

"I cannot remember." The woman wrinkled her forehead as she considered the question. "Perhaps it was many weeks ago. I do not know." She then clapped her hands and smiled. "Yes, I have a good thought. The man who drives the motor car which brought you here is our friend. He can be trusted. He

shall put something in his driver's food so that he becomes sick. Our friend will then drive the motor car and will find out—" Paperta made a small grimace,—"if there is anything to find out. Now we must write to Major Willis. It is late."

Muriel glanced at her watch and saw it was only half past ten. She could still return home, but in her present state of exhilaration she felt that, being firmly in the palace, she should stay there until something definite materialised.

"All right, I will write him a note."

When the letter was written it was sent off at once and Muriel wanted to continue the talk. But Paperta was firm. She said she wished to think and that they would talk again in the morning. Going into the inner room she went to the door and called for a servant to prepare a bed. It was, however, some time before things were as she desired because the aged female who appeared was obstinate and garrulous. Her mistress wanted the guest to sleep in the inner room, while she had the balcony one, but the servant had different views and did not hesitate to express. them. Paperta became exasperated.

"Do as I bid," she ordered, stamping a small foot. "You are senseless as a parrot, and chatter like a wayside monkey, O Utter Uselessness."

The ancient grumbled and mumbled, but did as she was told. Standing on the balcony Muriel watched the altercation and was amused. It seemed that in India servants were by no means slaves, but had minds of their own and much liberty of speech.

When the room was ready the girl took off her outer garment and lay down on a divan-bed, pulling a light covering over herself. Being only partly undressed she felt more able to cope with possible emergencies, Paperta having hinted that Bogra might put in an appearance. The thought of this did not worry her unduly. If he did come she would cope with him.

Although physically tired, her brain remained active and she went over the events of the exciting day. Could it be possible Clive was being held a prisoner out at the lake side? Paperta had been quite certain he was not in the palace, but, on the other hand, she might be mistaken. If Bogra had been really cunning he might have smuggled Clive into a palace dungeon without anyone in the zenana knowing it. The next time she saw him she would mention the lake and see his reactions, which might provide a clue.

Muriel's thoughts then turned to Major Willis. Would he be upset and worried that she was remaining the night, although

it had been made clear in the letter she was staying in the zenana? She turned restlessly on the soft bed. If she did not soon find out something definite about Clive she felt she never would. Yes, if the worst came to the worst, she would openly accuse Bogra, when he might be surprised into making an admission.

The room was dimly lighted by reflected light from the moon and she easily distinguished the furnishings. Suddenly she became aware, by intuition rather than hearing, that someone was behind the heavy curtain hanging before the entrance door. She started at the dark folds. They moved, were slowly drawn aside, and the vague outline of a man's figure came into the room. Muriel knew it must be Bogra. For a few seconds she felt frightened, but this passed, although she felt for her handbag, and extracting the automatic laid it beside her pillow. Raising herself until she was sitting upright she called out.

"Who is that? What are you doing here?"

The figure jerked, turned, and came towards the bed, but halted a few feet away.

"You did not return. I came to see that all is well," announced Bogra hoarsely.

"I am quite all right now, thank you," answered the girl calmly. "Please go away."

"But I want to talk to you. You are so lovely, so white, so exciting."

It had been clear to the girl for some time that the man wanted desperately to make violent love to her, but it was equally clear he was nervous and not sure of himself. This knowledge was a weapon she did not hesitate to use.

"I am flattered Your Highness should take such an interest in me," she said steadily. "But this is not the time, or the place, to make pretty speeches."

"You English are so cold," he grumbled, swaying slightly.

His voice was thick and he sat down suddenly on the end of the bed. Muriel did not protest, but felt for the automatic and its cool hardness gave her added assurance.

"I would say we are not generally casual in our love affairs, Your Highness," she answered lightly.

"I do not understand."

Bogra mumbled to himself and waggled his legs before getting to his feet, where he searched for the switch and turned on the light. This unexpected move surprised Muriel who wondered what it meant. Then, without warning, her brain

clicked and she was back in her village considering what they would say if they could see her now. Here she was, alone, except for a probably badly scared Paperta, with a bad, bold rajah who had definite designs on her virtue, and she was not frightened. That was rather surprising. Back again in the present she stared at the man, who was fumbling in his coat. He moved towards her, held out a hand, and dripping from the thick, dark fingers was a single string of large pearls.

"These are for you. I went to find them," he said, his lips working in and out.

Muriel looked longingly at the pearls, shook her head, and laughed lightly.

"Your Highness is very, very kind," she said. "But I cannot possibly accept such a gift."

"Why?"

Bogra scowled and flung the necklace on to the bed. He came closer, but the girl held up a warning hand.

"Your Highness is not himself," she observed, smiling. "Tomorrow perhaps we can talk as friends. Your Highness should not forget that I am a guest in your palace. Perhaps you will take me in your car? Major Willis has mentioned a pretty lake where you shoot birds. I should like to see it."

At the mention of the lake Bogra jerked up his head, and then half smiled and half leered.

"Ah, no. I cannot take you there." He chuckled unpleasantly. "At that place a man works for me. You would not understand." The man's mood then momentarily changed and he raised his voice. "He is a dog. He blackened my face. No. He is there for me alone. He is my pleasure."

"Oh, who is he?" Muriel strove desperately to make her voice sound casual.

The man shrugged his shoulders and waved a hand impatiently. Fuddled as he was, he realised he had said more than he should have done.

"It is nothing. Tomorrow you shall come to my treasure rooms. Yes? You will like that?"

Before the girl could answer there came from the courtyard the sound of men's voices raised in heated argument. Muriel and Bogra recognised Peter Willis's voice at the same moment. Bogra strode out on to the balcony and shouted down in Urdu, while the girl slipped out of bed and snatching up her dress started to draw it over her head. She, however, became entangled in the upper portions covering her head and so failed to see

Bogra dash past, his face distorted with fury. Muriel was still struggling and waving her arms when Paperta appeared on the scene. She stared for a moment at the strange figure and then ran forward.

"Ah hi. What has happened? Why are you like that?" she cried.

"Oh, help me, Paperta, I'm stuck," begged the girl in muffled tones.

As soon as the dress had been dealt with Muriel explained what had happened and they both laughed.

"Where has he gone?" asked Muriel looking about the room.

"He ran away. In the courtyard Major Willis is speaking angrily to some men."

"Yes, I know. I expect he's come for me." Going out on to the balcony she could see a group of men below. "Is that you, Major Willis?" she called. "I'm up here."

The commotion died down, and after a pause Peter Willis answered.

"You come down here at once, you bad girl," he shouted. "I've come to take you home."

Guided by an agitated Paperta the girl hastened down into the courtyard where she found the resident facing an angry Bogra, with a party of amazed officials as a background. Peter Willis was being firm and coldly polite.

"I have already told Your Highness several times that I am responsible for Miss Burdon. I intend she shall leave with me at once," he was saying when he caught sight of Muriel. "Ah, there you are. We are leaving at once. Please don't ask any questions now and make things more difficult than they are."

Muriel shrugged her shoulders, and turning, embraced the bewildered Paperta.

"Goodbye and thank you so much, Paperta. I will write to you, and I hope we shall meet again soon." She broke away and went across to where the resident was standing. "All right, Major Willis, I'm ready."

Side by side they walked quickly down the courtyard, followed by a variety of expressions from the group. Bogra's face worked with furious uncertainty before turning on his heel and going to his private quarters.

Waiting outside the main gate was the resident's car and Muriel got in beside him as he took the wheel. She glanced at his stern profile and set mouth.

"Are you very annoyed with me?" she enquired.

"Yes, I am rather."

"I am sorry. I hoped you'd understand from my note." She paused. "Well, it was worth it, Major Willis. I've found out where Mr. Penn is. Bogra told me himself."

"What!" Peter Willis was so startled that he jerked the wheel and nearly sent the car over the low protecting wall. When it was straight again he turned for an instant and grinned at his companion. "Go on. Tell me, you terrible infant."

Muriel told what had happened from the time she reached the palace, and she was still telling it when they arrived back at the bungalow, where a distracted Mrs. Willis was waiting for them. Hearing the car she rushed down the steps on to the drive and there burst into tears.

"I am so glad," she sobbed. "I haven't been able to go to bed or anything."

Muriel got out of her seat and put an arm about her hostess's shoulders.

"I was quite all right, really I was," she said. "I am dreadfully sorry you should have been so upset."

Amy Willis partly dried her tears as they went into the bungalow, leaving her husband to put away the car.

"It was so very thoughtless of you. You knew I even hated the idea of your going to the palace. Your being there all night was more than I could bear. Peter didn't want to go until I made him. I believe you and he are in league over something."

Muriel smiled and patted the elder woman's hand.

"As a matter of fact we are, and now I've found out what I wanted, I can tell you all about it."

All the servants had been sent off to their compound and it was very late before Muriel had first told her hostess the whole story, and then ended up what she had been telling Peter Willis. Mrs. Willis's questions and amazed exclamations had interrupted the narrative.

"And what are we going to do now?" asked the resident, pouring himself out another cold beer, while the women continued with tea drinking. "Do you want me to take the matter up officially?"

"Oh, no. I think that might be dangerous. If you did Bogra might murder Clive in a panic and cover up all traces before we could rescue him."

"Yes, that's possible, and it occurred to me as well. Shall we organise a rescue party ourselves? It could be done, you know."

"That might be worse than useless if there were an armed guard, or he were locked up in some dungeon. No, what I'll do is to go off to Delhi and see Shahmeeran and tell her exactly what's happened. I am certain she will find the right answer."

"I dunno about that," replied Peter Willis doubtfully. "We must go very carefully, because, if Bogra gets wind of what's doing, as he might well do if you were shadowed then we should be in the soup. I tell you what. Let's go to bed and discuss it again in the morning. I've got to consider what the old devil may do about my taking you off like that. He is bound to say I've insulted him, which I suppose I have."

CHAPTER XII

THE next morning Muriel and Major Willis went to his study, while Mrs. Willis kept watch to prevent a servant from listening on the outside of the door.

"Well, I saw at breakfast you were bursting with some idea," he said, as he sat down at his desk and lit his pipe. "Fire away and let me have it."

"I think the best thing to put Bogra off the scent would be for me to write to Paperta as I said I would. I am sure he will demand to see the letter."

Major Willis nodded and pulled strongly at his pipe.

"Yes, that is very likely. What are you going to say to her?"

"To begin with, how sorry I was to have had to go off as I did, and things of that sort. I shall then say I've got to rush up to Delhi to meet a friend who is passing through, but that I am coming back again in a few days. Then I will end up by hoping Bogra isn't upset, and that I'm looking forward to seeing his treasure. It should be all right, don't you think?"

"Yes, that will certainly do the trick. In fact I think it's a brilliant idea, because Bogra won't want to quarrel openly with me if he is keen on seeing you again."

"There's nothing in that which might make him at all suspicious?"

"I shouldn't think so. You say he was drunk when he gave himself away. Perhaps he has even forgotten he said anything, although we mustn't count on that."

The whole subject was then thoroughly discussed, the letter written to Paperta, and, finally, it was agreed that Muriel should catch the evening mail train from the junction.

On arriving in Delhi the next morning Muriel went to the George Hotel where she rang up Rugbar Chand and told him she was coming to see him. During the train journey she thought a good deal and had come to the conclusion it would be no good trying to conceal her movements and actions, but she must act quickly and before Bogra could become aware of what was going on.

The situation was explained to an astonished Rugbar, who arranged for Muriel to visit Shahmeeran at once. When she was shown into the reception room the woman greeted her warmly. They sat down on a divan under the whirling ceiling fan and Rugbar perched himself on the edge of a table facing them. After the usual courtesies and enquiries about health and general well-being, Shahmeeran turned to her companion and spoke earnestly and sincerely.

"You are brave. You are like the female tiger with her children. I know. I have heard," she announced. "Tell me everything. Speak it to Rugbar. He will give it in Urdu so that none may be lost."

Muriel told her story, and when she came to the scene in Paperta's rooms Shahmeeran, who had listened intently, laughed and clapped her hands.

"Good. Very good," she exclaimed in English. "Yes, perhaps Penn sahib is at the lake." She turned to Rugbar and asked in Urdu if he remembered her telling Clive that she saw water and a man labouring.

Rugbar nodded and grinned.

"Yes, O Spring of Enchantment. It was indeed so."

A long pause followed until the woman looked doubtfully at Muriel and shook her head.

"The tale unfolds well. One thing remains. I must be sure. Perhaps it is not Penn sahib at the lake, but another man."

"Oh, we never thought of that," cried Muriel, surprised and agitated.

"Doubtless it is the sahib." Shahmeeran then spoke to Rugbar who nodded and translated.

"She says her power has grown because she never acts until she is certain. She will do nothing until she is quite sure. She will find out."

"How will she find out?" asked Muriel anxiously. "There is so little time and if Bogra becomes suspicious he may do anything."

Rugbar agreed and then turned to the woman, who talked to him. He suddenly looked startled and as if about to refuse

to do some act. He then shrugged his shoulders and got off the edge of the table.

"Shahmeeran says she has decided to send me to find out. I am going now."

"What, at this moment?"

"Yes. She is going to do something the English know very little about. I have never done it. She is wonderful and many speak of this thing with lowered voices. She does it only in very urgent cases like this one. She does not do it if other means can be found."

Muriel looked puzzled and stared at Shahmeeran, who got up and began to walk about the room holding both hands tightly to her cheeks. A few moments later she turned and told Muriel to get off the divan, and Rugbar to lie on it. Moving towards him she looked across at the girl, ordering her to stand near one of the windows and on no account to speak.

Shahmeeran then sat on the edge of the divan close to Rugbar. Taking his hands in her own she said he must close his eyes. The girl, guessing that some form of seance was about to take place, watched the scene with interest. Laying down the hands, the woman, with a look of intense concentration, then leaned forward and placed her left hand over Rugbar's mouth and nostrils, and her right on his heart. Her right hand then began a gentle, circular massage. The youth now swung his body from side to side and Muriel saw that the flush of health glowing beneath his pale olive skin had faded and was replaced by a greyish look. Shahmeeran, watching his face intently, now removed her hands and sat back, her face drawn and pale from some great mental effort.

Several long moments passed, with only the soft whirring from the fan. Muriel found her hands clenched and her nerves beginning to quiver, when Rugbar with a stiff, unreal movement started to sit upright. His eyes still closed, he began to speak in English.

"Bright light is shining on the water. Beside it is a naked man. He works. He lifts great stones. He places one on top of the others. Near him is a man with a whip. The naked man has marks of the whip on his back."

"Go closer," ordered Shahmeeran in a tense voice. "Go very close. Call his name. Call Penn sahib."

A pause followed before Rugbar spoke again.

"I am beside him. I have called his name. He turns his head. I call again. He drops the stone he is carrying. He

answers, but I cannot hear. The man with the whip beats him on the back. He picks up the stone. He is crying."

"Call again," ordered Shahmeeran urgently.

Again there was a pause.

"I have called. He has become upright. His eyes shine. He speaks and I cannot hear."

"You know Penn sahib. Is it Penn sahib who speaks? Look well into his face."

"Yes, it is Penn sahib. His face has grown old. There is much hair. It is Penn sahib."

Shahmeeran nodded quickly and then began to revive the youth as she gently forced him back into a prone position. She reversed her previous motions which, however, suddenly grew faster and more agitated. She leaned over and stared down at Rugbar's drawn features. Her face showing acute alarm, she jerked up her head and looked at Muriel.

"Go. Bring my servant," she ordered. "Be swift or he dies."

Galvanized into action, Muriel dashed across the room and in a few moments returned with a woman, who ran across to her mistress. Shahmeeran shrilly gave her an order and the servant fled, returning with a box which she put down on the divan and unlocked with a key given to her. The lid was flung back and Muriel saw the box contained many phials and bottles of different shapes and sizes. Shahmeeran searched frantically, found a flagon-shaped, small bottle which she unstoppered and held to Rugbar's pale lips. She poured about half the contents of a thick, dark brown liquid into his mouth, and some dribbled out of his lips and ran down on to the silken coverlet. Handing the bottle to the servant she stared fixedly into the youth's face. The girl could see beads of perspiration standing on her forehead and about her nose.

A minute passed before Rugbar groaned and stirred. Shahmeeran sat back, sighed deeply, and held a hand against her breast. Recovering her poise she gave an order to the servant, who put the box on the floor. Kneeling down she began gently to massage the heart. When Shahmeeran got to her feet, her face was still pale and slightly haggard.

"It is now well," she announced, going across to Muriel and leaning out of the window. "I thought he would die. It was nearly so." She turned sharply and her expression made the girl shrink back. "If he had died I would have strangled Bogra

with my hands," she hissed. "Even so he shall pay for this."

The mood, however, passed as quickly as it had risen, and she smiled wanly at the girl, who was bewildered by these startling events.

"What happened?" she asked breathlessly.

"I sent him to find out. It was very dangerous. Men for such work must have long training. Never before has he done it. He nearly died. To wrench the soul from its sheath and send it on such a mission gambles with death."

At that moment Rugbar grunted, coughed and opened his eyes, turning his head from side to side.

"Where are you Shahmeeran?" he called. "I cannot see you. What happened? I feel as weak as a sick cow."

The woman hurried across to the divan, and Muriel was amazed at the look of soft, motherly concern on her face.

"It was good. You did well," she said in Urdu. "Very soon you will be strong again."

Some time later, when Rugbar had sufficiently recovered, the servant sat him up, propping his back with pillows, and was then told to leave the room.

"What befell, O Worker of Miracles?" asked Rugbar, grinning at Shahmeeran, who was now sitting on the end of the divan.

The woman told him in detail what he had said and he listened, showing little surprise.

"You knew nothing of what befell?" she enquired.

"Yes. I lay and you made me sleep. When I again opened my eyes it was as if fire water had been poured into my throat."

Shahmeeran nodded, but did not offer any explanation. A long pause followed until she beckoned Muriel to come closer. The girl was questioned about her immediate plans and also told not to mention the proceedings she had just witnessed to anyone. The woman then got to her feet and nodded, as if she had made up her mind.

"I must now to work," she said smiling. "It is certain beyond all doubt that Bogra has Penn sahib. There is but one way to do the work so that no misfortune shall befall. If we sent men to release the sahib there might be delay. One whisper in Bogra's ear and Penn sahib would vanish like a leopard in the night. We must catch and hold Bogra. He is cunning, but I am more so. Hassain Ali shall do the work. The stars work

with us. He is even now in Delhi." Shahmeeran held out her hand to Muriel. "Go now and take this boy with you. I will send when all is ready. Perhaps in two days. Perhaps in three. Once we have Bogra, time will not matter. Already a plan is born in my mind."

Rugbar slid off the divan and stood for a moment smiling at Shahmeeran, who asked him if he felt all right.

"Yes, O Pearl. I will return home and have rest. Tonight I shall be like the elephant."

Rugbar went to Muriel's side, and after she had said goodbye, the pair were moving towards the door when the man stopped, put up a hand to his face and staggered slightly. The girl caught him in her arms as he fell. When the two women laid him on the divan he was dead.

What happened after this always remained vaguely confused in Muriel's memory. Shahmeeran lost control of herself. Screaming piercingly she rushed from the room and returned almost at once with several frightened servants. The dazed girl, feeling her legs weaken, half collapsed on to a low table, and Shahmeeran now became the centre of a wildly excited group, who gesticulated, argued and surged about her. Her smooth hair was disordered, her eyes staring, and her lips drawn back. On the divan Rugbar lay as if he had fallen asleep.

Vain efforts were then made to restore him. When the commotion had died down Shahmeeran remembered Muriel, and turning to her, spoke sharply.

"Go. Say nothing of this. I will send word to you."

The girl nodded miserably, and getting to her feet wondered how she was going to manage the several flights of stairs. The old female servant, however, who was the only other person present who had kept her head, saw Muriel's condition and went to her aid. Murmuring words of sympathy, she helped the girl out of the house and put her into a horsed vehicle.

On arriving at the hotel, Muriel ordered a double brandy and soda to be sent up to her room. When the drink arrived she gulped it and lay down on the bed and tried to calm her quivering nerves. The brandy soon took effect, and after becoming drowsy she fell asleep. She slept for three hours and on waking saw it was half past two in the afternoon : she had missed luncheon but felt she could never eat again. Staring up at the ceiling of the dimly-lighted room, delayed shock overtook and rent her. Vivid details of the tragic scene rose up before her eyes. It did not seem possible the young Indian, so cheerful

and good-looking, could be lying dead in that strange house. It had been so sudden and so unnerving. Was she responsible? This thought brought her off the bed to pace up and down the room. If she had not come to Delhi this could never have happened. Her common sense then came to the rescue and she pulled herself together. These thoughts were as useless as they were stupid. Had she known of the danger she would never have permitted the seance and the responsibility therefore lay with Shahmeeran. But why had Rugbar died so suddenly? Had the woman really done what she said she had? Surely it was fantastic that one person could send another's soul half across India; and yet she felt sure that Rugbar had described an actual scene.

Her thoughts now turned to Clive, and this helped to steady her still further. That he should be working naked under a burning sun, beaten, and treated like a slave, made her shiver with a cold anger. She wished she had shot Bogra when he approached her bed in Paperta's rooms. He deserved no mercy. He must be treated like the dangerous beast he was.

Once more her thoughts changed. What was Shahmeeran going to do? Perhaps nothing at all now Rugbar was dead. On the other hand she had declared she would strangle Bogra if what had happened did occur. Up and down the room she paced, and round and round raced her thoughts, always returning to the mental picture of Rugbar lying on the divan. She must do something, anything to get away from this maddening circle. Should she go and see Bhai Chand? No, that would be too painful for both of them. Yes, she would go down and try to find a bathing costume and then swim in the bath in the hotel grounds. This, at least, would be some diversion, and after tea, when it was cooler, she might go on a sight-seeing tour of the Fort.

In the lounge the reception clerk was helpful and sent for a weedy little man who produced several gaudy bathing costumes and caps, which he offered for sale. She selected the least violent, and returning to her room, undressed, put on a dressing gown, and went down to the pool where she found several other people gathered under the large umbrellas, or swimming lazily. Diving into the almost unpleasantly warm water she swam about until hailed by a voice that sounded familiar. Looking round she saw the girl who had spoken to her when she first arrived in Delhi. Making for the edge of the bath she tried to remember her name, but failed.

"Hullo. So you've come back," called the girl, who was dressed in a short silk frock, with bared legs and lacquered toe-nails showing from openwork sandals. "You remember me, don't you? I'm Doris Smith."

Muriel nodded and smiled as she climbed out on to the grass verge.

"Yes, I remember you perfectly," she said shaking the water off her cap and pulling it from her head. "But I thought you were on your way home?"

"So I was." The girl giggled. "But you see I met ever such a nice young man here. Peter Brick. He works out in New Delhi. Quite an important person he is."

"Oh," answered Muriel, not sure what reply to make to this announcement.

They moved to where Muriel had flung her dressing gown and towel over a chair-back. They sat down and Doris chattered gaily, obviously glad to have someone to talk to.

"Yes. I met him the very night you left. When I told him I was going home he was ever so upset and said I must stay longer." She giggled again. "So I did, you see."

The girl broke off and stared hard at her companion.

"Ooh! You do look funny somehow," she cried. "Aren't you well, or something? You look as if you'd seen a ghost. Anything happened?"

Muriel shook out her fair hair and nodded.

"Yes, I had rather a nasty shock this morning. I'm feeling better now, but I'd rather not talk about it."

Doris's warm, but fickle heart responded at once, and leaning across, she put a beringed hand on Muriel's arm.

"Yes, I know. I once felt bad like that. Real queer I was, but I soon got over it. I'll cheer you no end." She gave a little shriek as an idea occurred to her. "Peter is coming for me this evening. We're going to a party in New Delhi. You must come too. He won't mind a nice girl like you."

Muriel smiled and allowed herself to be persuaded. After tea they set off for the Fort, a plan that enchanted Doris, who had hardly heard of this historic place.

Peter Brick arrived in the hotel lounge at seven o'clock and was introduced to Muriel by the excited Doris, who explained her idea. The young man, pale, suave, and well-groomed, at once agreed it was a good plan. Several hours later Muriel went to bed feeling more normal that she had thought would be possible.

CHAPTER XIII

As soon as Muriel had gone Shahmeeran quickly became calmer, and ordering the servants from the room he sent an urgent order for Hassain Ali to come to her. When the burly Afghan hastened into a room below the reception room he found her lying full length on a pile of cushions with hands clasped behind her head. She turned and stared up at him with dark, brooding eyes.

"What has befallen, O Eye of Beauty?" he boomed, his thumbs stuck in his broad belt, and his legs wide apart. "There was much work, but I came swiftly as a tiger to its mate."

Through clenched teeth and without moving, Shahmeeran briefly, and with brutal frankness, explained what had happened. Hassain Ali listened and his bearded mouth fell open, showing discoloured and broken teeth.

"Fifty thousand furious devils!" he cried when the woman paused. "What misfortune! What disaster! Where does he lie?"

Shahmeeran indicated the ceiling with an upward glance.

"There," she said, and sat upright. "His father comes. Together you shall take the boy to his home. It must be done in secret. He was as a son to me. We shall have revenge."

The Afghan cleared his throat, nodded, and wondered what else was in store for him. That he was to be given some unpleasant duty seemed certain. Shahmeeran explained what she required in great detail.

"By the beard of the Prophet himself," he cried, daring to interrupt the woman's flow of orders. "I am to catch and bring this prince here? It will be like taking a cobra by the tail. My beard will be singed and my face blackened."

Shahmeeran's eyes glowed, and she smiled with her lips alone.

"There will be no trouble, my friend," she announced. "We will remove this tiger's claws. We must saw off his teeth."

Hassain Ali frowned and hesitated, clearing his throat again. He knew how dangerous it was to court this woman's displeasure. but the thought of kidnapping a prince horrified him. Across the tribal border in the north he would murder an enemy without thought, but in British India a ridiculous fuss was made over quite minor matters. It also seemed unnecessary, and would doubtless have alarming consequences.

"Why take him, O Daughter of Desire?" he asked pleadingly. "With two men, known to me, I could snatch up this sahib and bring him here."

Shahmeeran clenched her teeth and her eyes sparkled unpleasantly.

"Your mind moves as slowly as a stubborn camel, Afghan," she snapped. "There are two excellent reasons why this malignancy must be brought to me. If you attempted to take the sahib some mischance might befall and then he would be entirely lost to us. I desire to face this Bogra, my enemy. Have you forgotten the matter of 'He who Limps' in Kabul?" The woman spoke softly, but the man shivered at the deadly sub-tinkle in her voice. "Those who wallow in the mire of iniquity shall be purged with the waters of chastisement. I will hold the cup to his lips. My eyes will be ravished, and his cries shall be music in my ears. You shall witness this thing."

Shahmeeran got to her feet and moved towards Hassain Ali, who stepped back hurriedly as she bore down upon him.

"If you fail this time my displeasure will be such, Afghan, that you shall regret the day your doubtless immoral mother gave you birth." The woman laughed lightly, and her tone changed to a normal one. "I will send to Paperta, who shall have it come to Bogra's ear that all is not well at the lake-side. This will draw him as a bleating goat draws the hunting leopard. Remember the miss-sahib said he always goes alone in the motor-car. This time my man shall drive the motor-car and all should be well and easy as plucking a ripe melon."

In due course the disgruntled Hassain Ali was dismissed, and rumbled rebelliously as he made his way down the stairs. Twenty-four hours later, disguised as a Jain priest and accompanied by two other men also in priest's garb, he arrived in the vicinity of the lake in Bogra State. The party stayed the night in a nearby village, but slipped away before dawn. Leaving his men some distance from the lake Hassain Ali went to spy out the land. Crouching in some bushes he saw the dam, the buildings, and the general layout of the area. Moving like a shadow, for all his bulk, the Afghan attempted without success to locate Clive's whereabouts. As the sun rose he settled in some shrubs from where he could watch the dam, and also the road from Lingam.

An hour passed and it was fully daylight before he heard faint sounds away on his right. Parting the leaves he peeped out and at once gave a grunt of satisfaction. Twenty yards

away a naked man, who shuffled forward with bent shoulders and hair dripping about his face, was being urged forward by a single guard, a tall man carrying a whip. Hassain Ali watched intently and then sighed. How easy it would have been to handle this situation. A curse on all women with their tortuous minds. To them revenge was sweeter than honey, and Shahmeeran was no exception.

Having seen what he wanted, the Afghan went back for his companions and the party took up a commanding position beside a low building near where Hassain Ali hoped Bogra's car would halt. He squatted down with his back to a wall and in the shade of a thick pipal tree. What should be done if the motor-car did not come? Shahmeeran had laid much emphasis upon the need for haste.

Through the burning heat of the day they waited, growing hotter and more exasperated with each passing hour. It was nearly five o'clock when one of the men saw a cloud of dust rising from the direction of Lingam, and he called Hassain Ali's attention to it. The Afghan adjusted his priest's shawl, stepped out on to the road and squatted down with folded arms and head lowered as if deep in meditation. The approaching car slowed down and stopped a few yards beyond where he sat. Glancing up sideways Hassain Ali saw Bogra step out of the car and stride towards the dam. In one movement the Afghan was on his feet and crouching in rear of the great saloon. Here he was joined by the driver, who was pretending to examine the tyres. A hasty consultation followed and resulted in Hassain Ali going back to his companions, to whom he gave curt orders. The men nodded, slipped behind the low building, and the driver went to the front of the car leaving the Afghan to hasten down the road towards Lingam. What happened then was described to Shahmeeran two days later.

"O Pearl of Asia, when I came to a place which was hidden from the lake and the buildings by a great pipal tree and other bushes I halted. It was hot and I sweated with fear that some unhallowed mischance should shatter our plan.

"Uneasy as a monkey with mange I waited. The motor-car approached and I showed myself on the road that the driver might see me. Becoming near, the motor-car made loud and sudden noises in the rear and it was as if small cannon were being fired. The motor-car halted beyond me and I saw Bogra lean forward and speak, his face dark with anger. I crept forward and hid behind the motor-car. The driver got from his seat and flung

open the door in the rear. He spoke to Bogra, who cursed and stepped on to the road. His back was turned to me and I leaped upon him as a tiger upon the sambhur. I threw the cloth over his head and drew it about his throat, as is the custom. I was much amazed because he fought as if possessing the strength of several men. Never before have I heard such curses and foulness. This prince was indeed beyond even the faquir who sits beside the iron bridge at Peshawar." Hassain Ali paused and the laughter rumbled in his chest, while Shahmeeran smiled and ordered him to continue.

"The driver came to my aid, and together we raged beside the motor-car as if mad. Bogra bit him in the forearm and he howled like a hyena. It was of much strangeness, but the cloth at last did its work and the prince's strength began to leave him. We drove a wad into his foul mouth and bound him. I then blew the powder into his nostrils and his senses departed. We tore off his sahib's clothes even to his pugri, leaving him naked. We bound him, flung him to the floor in the motor-car to the rear, and with much impatience turned to wait the coming of those I sent to bring the sahib."

"Bring the sahib?" cried Shahmeeran astonished. "There was no order. What befell?"

Hassain Ali, flushed with the general success of his mission was not intimidated by the woman's tone.

"O Pearl, there being only a single guard it came to my mind it would please you if I also brought the sahib."

The woman nodded agreement and the man continued.

"They were much delayed and I was about to seek them when they appeared running towards us. Lacking breath they told what had befallen. They had beaten the guard over the head and he fell senseless. The sahib nearby witnessed these things. He laughed as if mad and turning fled into the bushes and was gone. The men searched but he was not to be found. Because I said there was need for great speed in this matter they returned without the sahib."

Hassain Ali went on to tell how he had accepted the misfortune and ordered one of the men, who was not unlike Bogra in face and figure, to dress in the prince's clothes.

The party now arranged themselves in the large interior of the saloon. The Afghan managed to crouch down beside the driver so that he could not be seen; the man dressed as Bogra sat upright in the rear seat; while the other lay upon the senseless figure of Bogra on the floor. The car drove rapidly towards

Lingam and on nearing the city was taken past the main gate so that passers-by could see what they imagined was their ruler returning from his trip. The car, however, did not go into the city, but swept on into open country. Four miles distant it turned off and was eventually hidden in a clump of trees until it became dark.

When they were clear of Bogra State a change was made into a waiting car, and the great saloon abandoned in the sandy bed of a dry river. Bogra, in spite of rough handling, was still very lively when taken late at night to a house in a narrow alley of the Goldsmiths ward in Delhi city. Shahmeeran was informed, and made her final preparations for a miniature durbar, which she was determined should be as impressive as it could be made.

The reception room became transformed. On the walls were aged Persian brocades and strange tapestries ; the floor glowed with priceless rugs brought out from great boxes ; and in the space between the windows was a long, narrow, dais-like erection on which stood a legless couch upholstered in gold and silver brocade, a European style of chair, and a pile of cushions, together with a backrest. From the ceiling hung many pierced oil lamps, and a swinging bowl which would give off puffs of cedar and sandalwood smoke.

Muriel, waiting impatiently for news in her hotel, was rung up by Bhai Chand and told she was expected at Shahmeeran's house at ten o'clock that night, and he would call for her in his car. When asked for reasons and news he replied he had none, but she must be prepared for something unusual.

On arrival they were taken to the reception room, and crossing the threshold the girl paused and gasped at the unexpected magnificence, which exceeded anything she had seen. In the soft light from the lamps, brocades, silks, and carpets, glowed like unpolished gems, but what caught and held Muriel's attention was the exotic figure of Shahmeeran reclining on the couch. How like some ancient queen she was. Her dress was of white satin, with a tight bodice and short sleeves, and the full skirt creamed over her legs. Her jewels were sapphires. A huge pear-shaped stone hung in the middle of her forehead, and round her slim neck was a string of square, unset sapphires. Her bodice was embroidered in floral designs with sapphires of many sizes and shapes, while on her arms were bracelets, and on her fingers rings, all of which were set with stones so large as to be

almost ugly. In her hand she held a stiff, oval fan covered with kingfisher feathers and ending in a blue lacquered handle.

Muriel stared at Shahmeeran and realized the woman had changed considerably. She now exuded a fierce personality, and her face, cleverly made up, was regal in its calm strength.

The woman waved her fan lazily and smiled at the girl standing in front of Bhai Chand near the door, but Muriel saw there was now no friendliness or laughter in that smile ; in fact the expression of the eyes was distinctly feline.

"Welcome to my poor house," she said in English. "Come. Be seated." She indicated the chair placed on the right of the couch. She turned to Bhai Chand. "You also, my friend. Sit on the cushions."

Muriel went across and sat down, and as she did so the woman looked approvingly at the girl's gown, which was the same as that she wore for the durbar at Lingam.

"Your clothes have dignity and charm," she said slowly. But your face is pale. You are anxious ? You crave news ?"

"Yes. What about Mr. Penn ?" replied Muriel eagerly.

"He is unharmed. He has gone from Bogra's hands."

"Oh ! He has gone." The girl turned and her face lit up. "Where is he ? Is he here ?"

"No. Have patience. You shall be told what is known. Now other matters wait urgently upon us." Putting out a hand she pressed an electric bell that rang shrilly somewhere below, and looking at Bhai Chand, seated cross-legged among the cushions, she smiled faintly. "The time has come, my friend. He is here. The cup is at our lips. We will both savour what it may hold."

From outside the door came heavy footsteps, and Hassain Ali appeared in the doorway. Bowing, he gave the Mahomedan salute before crossing the room.

"He comes, O Graciousness," he announced, grinning broadly. "A fierce tiger who is now as a castrated male cat."

Shahmeeran nodded as the Afghan took up a position beside the left window, where he stood leaning against the sill smiling and fingering his beard. From the stairs there were now shufflings and a weird procession trooped awkwardly into the room. First came Bogra between a pair of badly frightened sweepers. Naked, except for a scarlet loin cloth, his wrists were tied behind his back, and attached to each elbow were two thin ropes whose ends were clutched by the sweepers in claw-like, trembling hands. Directly in rear of the trio was the driver of the car, somewhat sheepishly holding a huge, naked scimitar. At his heels surged

a small crowd of Indians, all old, or middle-aged and dignified, whose expressions ranged from nervousness to excited expectation.

Bogra, with a cringing sweeper at each side was urged forward until he stood facing Shahmeeran and nearly touching the foot of the dais. The crowd in the rear ranged itself in a semi-circle as far away as it could get. There was much shuffling and subdued coughing.

Bogra was a weird spectacle as he stood with his hairy, dark body shining with sweat, and his bloodshot eyes glaring round the room like a newly-trapped animal. His thick lower lip hung loose, and several days growth of beard added to his unkempt appearance. His eyes met Shahmeeran's but he quickly looked away, and in doing so noticed Muriel. The sight of her clearly surprised and angered him. He jerked up his head, his eyes glowed, and his lips parted, but before he could speak Shahmeeran did so.

"You are surprised to see the English girl? You will learn why she is here, Siha Man Kakariji Gopat, Rajah of Bogra. Listen closely, my enemy. At my order you were taken and brought. You stand captive between the sweepers. They clean the public latrines, but each finds more favour with the gods than you do, Foulness." Shahmeeran spoke quietly, but her tone made one or two of the more nervous spectators shiver. "You, a prince born of noble and most excellent stock, are lower than these sweepers, the Untouchables. You have long secretly feared me and now you shall know the depth of my hate." She leaned forward. "Look into my eyes. Can you see the hate lying there? Hate cold and vengeful as that in a cobra's eye. You shall learn why, when you were first taken, I did not strangle you with these small hands of mine. Hate would have given them the strength for the deed. You shall know why I humble you before these gathered about me. Why you shall endure the pain you have given to so many who were utterly guiltless. Why you shall endure the fear you bred in others."

The woman paused, shifted her position on the couch, and the audience waited in a silence so complete that sounds from a distant stringed instrument strummed on a house top drifted in through the open windows on the hot, stale air. Bogra now stood erect, glaring unwaveringly at Shahmeeran, a fanatical gleam in his yellow-flecked eyes. Beside him the sweepers fawned, with bent backs and terrified eyes fixed on the glittering figure, so regal, so cold, so distant. Muriel, although she did not under-

stand what had been said, grasped the trend and felt the emotional strain as she tightly gripped the armrests of her chair. The scene was unreal. It was something out of an eastern fairy story, only to be fully appreciated in retrospect.

Shahmeeran began to speak again. She did not look at her prisoner, but at a spot beyond him above the doorpost.

"You do not remember me, Bogra. Indeed you never knew me. When your gracious father went to the pyre and you had cracked his skull to free his spirit, as is the custom, you settled in your foul nest in the fair palace at Lingam. I was a child. Do you recall Ahar, he who was chief groom? He was my father, and many times I heard him tell my mother of your evil deeds. Listen closely, Bogra. I will unfold a story ; a story hellish and vicious.

"In the morning you, led by some fiend from hell, came to the stables. In its stall was a horse. A fine horse, supple as a bamboo, of high mettle, and cared for by Dhola. Do you recall Dhola? He was my brother, who loved the animal with a great love. When you came, like the rampant devil you are, he was cleaning it with a brush. Being of high spirit and tender skin, it became restless when its belly was reached, gnashing its teeth and lashing out with its hooves. My brother at his work spoke lovingly and soothingly, unaware of your presence. Being ever without sense you drew too near and were struck in the groin by a hoof, and fell screaming to the stones. Do you remember? To me it was as if yesterday. Do you recall how you howled and men came running? What then befell? They led out the guiltless horse and with eager hands you poured the oil over it. You called for the light and set it ablaze. Do not the hideous screams still sound in your ears, Bogra? They reached us in the zenana and we trembled. But what of Dhola? Ah hi, what of him? He who was my brother. I loved him above all men, and before your gloating eyes his hands were hacked off, his tongue torn out, because he dared to raise his voice in protest at your unhallowed deed. He died, and with him went my heart, consumed in the fire that ate his mangled body on the pyre. That, Bogra, is why I have nursed my hate, knowing one day I should hold the cup of revenge in my grasp."

The woman turned restlessly on the couch, glittering fantastically, and Hassain Ali watched her with fascinated interest. So this was the answer to those things which had often puzzled him in the past. He softly cleared his throat and wondered what was to follow. Something unpleasant he was sure. Shahmeeran continued her indictment in the same cold, level voice.

"Even I, well versed of the evil in men's hearts, turn pale when considering your malignant soul, Thug that you are. The corruptness of your actions rises like fumes from decay ; they wriggle like maggots spewed out of your vile soul. I have waited, and listened, and waited. Because you are named prince, and because the English sit here in Delhi, you thought none could touch you. You were cunning, and the English never see beyond their thin noses. It is true the dead are dead and dumb, but the living now wail for vengeance. The past is dust stirred only by our emotions ; mine brew a storm about your head.

"What of the present ? Time has not changed or softened your heart. You move from one vileness to another. Not three moons past Sarani was strangled in your palace. She was loved by 'He who limps in Kabul.' But what of the sahib ? Ah ho ! You quiver. All is known to me. This miss-sahib came seeking him. She dared even to seek him in your lair, being courageous beyond many. From your drunken lips she learned the truth. Speak dog. Tell us why you held this sahib in bondage." The woman's voice rose in sharp command.

Bogra, his face glistening with sweat, hesitated before speaking hoarsely.

"He blackened my face. I was without honour."

In one swift movement Shahmeeran left the couch and was at the edge of the dais, glaring down at her captive like a goddess of wrath. She struck him violently with her fan and it crumpled at the tip.

"You dare to speak of honour to me, Blackman," she screamed. "Ten thousand foul insults could not blacken your face to that darker than your soul. Tell me what befell."

Bogra in reply lifted his head and spat in Shahmeeran's face, not once but twice. In a strangled voice, seething with a fury bordering on madness, he proceeded to call her several original and highly indelicate names, causing Hassain Ali to smile, in spite of his consternation at the spitting incident. Everyone else waited with taut nerves for the woman's reactions. She stood rigid for a long moment and then turning, went to the couch and wiped her face with the edge of the coverlet. She sat down, outwardly composed and stared at the bent and broken edge of her fan.

Muriel watched her with an almost detached interest. She felt as if she were watching a highly exciting play. Shahmeeran patted her hair, adjusted the sapphire on her forehead, and

looked up at Bogra, who was standing with veins thick on his face, and his mouth twisted and evil.

"You have courage, Bogra. I admire it even in men such as you. We will now see at what depth it lies. You smiled when my brother's hands were cut off; you delighted in Sarani's struggles; and you gloated upon the sahib's misery. We will test your bravery. The cord, the irons, the pincers await. They were not collected without difficulty, although doubtless lie to hand in Lingam as freely as platters in a cookhouse." Shahmeeran's voice took on a prophetic ring, and everyone held their breath. "You will return to Lingam, but men, when they look towards you shall shudder. They shall mutter among themselves, saying the waters of chastisement are indeed bitter. The sight of you shall turn them in fear from evil thoughts and deeds, saying one to another: if princes can suffer thus, what of us. Hell stalks ever in our shadows; for you it shall race before."

The woman broke off abruptly and nodded to Hassain Ali, who came forward and said something to the car driver. Together they hustled Bogra and the terrified sweepers towards the door, and the Indians hastily scrambled aside to make a lane for them. As soon as they were gone Shahmeeran rose to her feet and looked at Bhai Chand, who also got up.

"You will aid us?" she said. "Your son's ashes should be cooled, or they rise in a whirlwind about your head, my friend."

The old gentleman shook his head, and spread out his hands in a humble manner.

"I am no longer young, O Graciousness," he said pleadingly. "The hot blood cools in my veins, and I have no desire to witness the sights you offer. You said, and truly, the dead are dead and dumb. My son was of gentle spirit and would not have these things for vengeance sake. To tame the tiger, yes. He is as a cobra whose fangs must be drawn. I crave permission to remain."

Shahmeeran stared at him in surprise. She hesitated, nodded and swung round on Muriel, who was sitting in her chair, uneasy with nameless apprehension.

"My friend, Bhai Chand, will sit with you, Miss Burdon," she announced. "I depart on other matters. I will return."

Stepping down from the dais she swept across the room, and with an imperious gesture signalled to the Indians to follow her out of the door. When they had gone Muriel turned to Bhai Chand, who was walking restlessly up and down the room.

"Tell me what it was all about," she suggested, leaving her chair. "I did not understand anything that was said. Where have they gone?"

The old gentleman paused and looked reflectively at the girl before replying.

"I sometimes read English books," he observed at last. "I recall in one, a man said the English sometimes try to make the punishment fit the crime. She has gone to do this very thing."

"Will she torture him?" asked Muriel sharply.

Bhai Chand nodded gravely.

"Oh! How awful. I had an idea this might happen." The girl put hands to her ears as if to shut out possible anguished cries.

"Be calm, please Miss Burdon." Bhai Chand moved forward and placed a hand on her arm for an instant. "Listen and I will tell you what was said. It was not without interest. Do not consider what now takes place. To do so will distress you and be without gain."

"All right, I will try and listen," she replied. "But I feel just as if I were going to have a tooth out, or something. There is a nasty feeling down here." She patted her waist.

Bhai Chand then gave her brief but graphic extracts from the recent scene between Shahmeeran and Bogra. He had reached the description of the death of the groom when there came from below a long dry howl, which became a yell, and died away in a gargling cry. Muriel had been leaning against a window sill. She gripped the woodwork and became very pale.

"I'm going to faint," she announced, and promptly did so.

The man caught her as she crumpled up. Placing her on the couch he decided to leave her as she was. It was fortunate he did so because the muffled cries grew louder and more horrifying, causing Bhai Chand to tremble and sweat profusely. Not long afterwards a commotion began downstairs. Men shouted, there were rushing footsteps, and doors slammed so violently that the room quivered. It was at this point Muriel regained consciousness. Pale and nervous she sat up, heard the noise, struggled to her feet, and stood holding on to the back of the couch.

"I'm going," she cried wildly. "I won't stay here another minute."

Staggering across the floor she reached the door and vanished before the old gentleman could make up his mind to stop her. She never remembered how she got down the dark, steep stairs, but when she arrived at the courtyard a wild scene was taking place. Leaning against the doorpost she watched it. A small

crowd surged about three figures, lit by waving hand-torches and an electric light bulb over the street door, which was open and jammed with excited spectators. A tall young English police officer, in a well-cut white cotton tunic and trousers, and wearing a white topee, was clutching a hideously distorted figure by the back of the neck, while two Indian policemen held the figure's arms. Facing the officer was Shahmeeran, who was gesticulating and shouting at him.

What had occurred was, Bogra had managed to break away from his tormentors and had fled down into the courtyard and so out into the street. As he emerged from the house he had almost fallen into the arms of the police officer and three policemen who had been visiting a house in the neighbourhood. The officer, seeing this strange and bloody creature, promptly had him caught. With the captive and his men he had hurried into the courtyard to be faced by a furious Shahmeeran and her followers. The officer demanded an explanation and she demanded Bogra. Such was the position when Muriel arrived on the scene.

The officer saw her at once. His amazement at the appearance of a young English woman in evening dress at such a time, and in such a place, was so great that he released his grip on Bogra's neck with the result he made another bid to escape. He was, however, instantly pounced on by Hassain Ali and the remaining policeman. Shahmeeran was swept aside in the struggle, and Bogra, being naked and covered with sweat, was as difficult to hold as an active snake, and would have got away had not someone slammed the street door. The heavy wooden door caught one of the spectators by the foot and his sudden roars of anguish had the effect of partly calming the crowd inside.

Realizing Bogra was showing signs of exhaustion the officer left him and hurried across to Muriel.

"What on earth are you doing here?" he demanded, pushing back his topee and wiping his forehead with a bright blue handkerchief.

"I don't really know," she answered. "Looking for Mr. Penn I suppose."

"Mr. Penn? Who's he?"

"He got lost out here and I came out to try and find him.",

"Good Lord, yes. I remember. It was the fellow who was missing in Peshawar. Did you expect to find him here?"

"I might have done."

"Whose house is this?"

"Hers, of course." Muriel pointed to the sparkling figure of Shahmeeran, who was watching them.

"She looks like a queen with all those jewels. Who is she?"

The girl told him, and the young man's ingenuous face showed astonishment.

"That woman. Is it really? Then who's the wretch who dashed out into the street just now?"

"That's the Rajah of Bogra?"

This was too fantastic for the officer to accept, and he said so heatedly. At that moment Bhai Chand came down the stairs and joined them. The officer recognized him at once.

"Why it's you, Bhai Chand. And what are you doing mixed up in this affair?"

"I brought this young lady here," answered the old gentleman grimly, his gaze fixed on the group near the street door.

"Oh, you did, did you. Then tell me. Is that the Rajah of Bogra over there?"

Bhai Chand hesitated and shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not give information to the police in someone else's house. Ask her." He indicated Shahmeeran.

"All right. Come along with me, both of you," ordered the officer.

They followed him and stood in his rear as he stared at the strange group. On the left Shahmeeran, her dress disordered and splashed with blood, stood with hands pressed to her corsage. Behind her was Hassain Ali, without his pugri and looking very upset and frightened. On the right three policemen were now supporting the exhausted Bogra, and as a background were the Indians looking like badly scared sheep. The officer peered at Bogra's face. Used as he was to unpleasant sights he shuddered. Few people would have recognized a prince in the sagging, fearful wretch. On his forehead was the hideous wale of the drawn cord; all the front teeth were missing and from the thick, drooping lower lip ran dribblets of froth and blood. The wrists were hacked and torn, and the fingers awry, as if the bones were broken. Pale and grim the officer turned on Shahmeeran and barked a question in Urdu.

"Who is this man?"

The woman lowered her hands and stiffened. Her eyes glittered and her teeth clenched.

"He concerns me alone, sahib," she replied, and then changing her mind, smiled wickedly. "I see you are but a child in wisdom, or you would know I do not accept questions, but ask them. The police are as pestuous as fleas in this city, but you do not lack zeal, child."

The officer flushed painfully as she pointed to Bogra.

"Take him away if you so desire. I have worked my will upon him. Tell the commissioner sahib, that I, Shahmeeran, have made him settle heavy debts. These be my witnesses." She indicated the huddle of Indians. "Further say to the burra sahib that you have unearthed a hornet's nest and yet have not been stung. Say, if further be heard of this matter not one, but a thousand swarms shall fall upon the police, driving them to cower in middens that are their natural homes. You have my permission to go."

The officer hesitated. The situation was an extremely delicate one. He, like everyone else in Delhi, knew who Shahmeeran was, and more than once the police had felt her strength and retired in disorder. Duty now pointed to his arresting her, but that might have alarming consequences. She read his thoughts and smiled sardonically.

"I shall not depart from this house, sahib. If you dare to come again I shall be here armed with words for daggers, and dark secrets for lances. It were indeed wiser to forget."

At this moment Muriel, who had been standing with the officer between herself and Bogra, moved and came almost face to face with him. For the first time she fully saw his condition. She stared in horror, and turning, buried her face in the officer's shoulder.

"Take me away," she cried trembling violently. "Take me away. I can't stand any more I tell you."

The officer acted at once. Putting an arm about her shoulders he led her towards the door. In passing he ordered his men to follow him and bring Bogra with them. One of the Indians wrenched open the door and they passed out into the street, dark and crowded with vague, whispering figures.

When the party reached the side street close at hand, where a police car was waiting, the officer wanted Muriel to go with him to the police barracks. She however, refused, saying she was going back to her hotel. After some hesitation he agreed. Ordering his men to find a vehicle and take Bogra to the police hospital, he helped the girl into the car and drove to the George Hotel, where she arrived in a state of semi-collapse. In the lounge Doris Smith was saying good-night to Peter Brick. Seeing Muriel's condition she left him and ran across.

"Oh, whatever's happened?" she cried in distress. "Are you ill, or something?"

"She's just had rather a nasty experience, I'm afraid,"

answered the officer, supporting the drooping girl. "She should go to bed at once and be given a strong sleeping draught. Will you look after her? I must dash off at once."

"Yes, of course I will," exclaimed Doris eagerly. "The poor thing. She looks real bad, doesn't she, Peter?"

Her companion, who had joined her, agreed, and as soon as the officer had gone they got Muriel to her room. Doris put her to bed, while Peter Brick went in search of the draught. This was duly administered and it quickly took effect. Doris bade Peter Brick a fond good-night and prepared to settle down and spend the night in Muriel's room, but this was not necessary because Muriel slept deeply, only stirring and muttering occasionally.

When he left the hotel the officer drove to the chief commissioner's house where he found him already in bed. A servant was sent to give him an urgent message, and so pulling on a dressing gown the aggrieved commissioner went down to the hall. He was a big, red-faced man, with a fierce manner and a clear, active brain.

"Oh, it's you Kerr, is it," he snorted. "What the hell do you mean by dragging me out of bed at this time of night?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but it is rather important and I thought you should know about it as soon as possible."

"Well, get it off your chest, and let me get to bed again."

As if giving evidence in a court the officer told what had occurred up to the time he caught sight of Muriel.

"An English girl?" exclaimed the commissioner startled.

"Yes sir. I went over and asked her what she was doing in the house, and she said she was looking for a fellow called Penn. You remember, sir, we had a lot of trouble over him some time ago."

The elder man nodded.

"Then the art dealer, Bhai Chand came on the scene. I asked him who the naked bloke was but he wouldn't answer and told me to ask the woman Shahmeeran."

"What!" yelped the commissioner. "That woman. My God!"

"Yes, sir." The officer grinned. "And there's more to come. The English girl said the fellow was the Rajah of Bogra. He'd been tortured, and is in a pretty rotten state, sir."

The commissioner's eyes bulged and he spluttered.

"The Rajah of Bogra! I never heard anything so damned silly. The girl must be off her head. Did you question her?"

"I didn't really have a chance to, sir. You see when she got near and saw the state of this alleged rajah she half collapsed, and the woman Shahmeeran ordered me out of the house."

Kerr repeated Shahmeeran's threats and warnings, and told what he had done with Bogra and Muriel. The commissioner was now pacing up and down the hall in a state of agitation.

"Who is this girl? What's her name?" he snapped, pausing for a moment.

Kerr looked embarrassed.

"I forgot to ask her name, sir. You see it was such an unusual business I missed that point."

The commissioner was about to curse his subordinate, but changed his mind.

"Come into my office," he said, striding towards a door in the rear of the hall. "This affair must be thought out."

In a large room were leather arm-chairs and a vast desk, littered with papers and odds and ends. The elder man poured out two whiskies and sodas, and then putting down his glass, lighted a cheroot and began to question Kerr closely on Shahmeeran's manner and general appearance.

"Yes, that's the woman all right," he announced, "a tigeress if there ever was one. As she said, you certainly seem to have unearthed a hornet's nest, young fellow. It's a pity you couldn't verify that it really was Bogra. Tortured him, you said. Even she would hardly dare to do that to a ruling prince and yet—." He paused and blew out a cloud of smoke. "It is strange, all the same, that only yesterday I got a very secret document stating that the Rajah of Bogra was reported missing from his state. What exactly had she been doing to the fellow?"

Kerr gave a vivid description, and his superior looked more anxious than before.

"My God! that woman's a she-devil. I always said she was. I wonder what she'd got against him? His own reputation is none too good."

"Well sir, as far as I could gather, that fellow Penn is mixed up in it somehow."

The commissioner nodded and went through the whole affair again, asking Kerr many searching questions. He then stubbed out his cheroot as if he had come to a conclusion.

"The first thing to be done is to verify the fellow is Bogra. If he is I'll go and see them in New Delhi. This business will need delicate handling, my lad. See that you keep your mouth shut. Warn your men to do the same. Do that before you go to

bed. Let me have your report first thing in the morning, and also get a report on the fellow's condition from the hospital. And yes, warn the hospital people that no inquiries are to be made about the fellow's identity. Say it is my order. By the way, do you think your men know who he is?"

"No sir, I'm sure they don't, because the girl told me when we were at the far end of the courtyard, and it wasn't mentioned again as far as I remember."

"Good. I think we can trust Bhai Chand to keep quiet. Be off now."

When Muriel awoke at nine o'clock she found Doris Smith sitting beside the bed. She blinked and sat up.

"You here?" she exclaimed. "Oh yes, I remember now."

"Now don't go getting yourself upset again," warned the girl, pushing her back on to the pillows. "You lay quiet and I'll get you a nice, strong cup of tea. You'll feel pounds better after it."

When the tea duly arrived Muriel drank two cups rapidly while Doris fussed and petted her until she protested.

"But I'm not ill you know. I feel almost all right now. Please don't make such a fuss, although it's awfully good of you."

"Don't be so silly," cried Doris. "I haven't done anything really. Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, except that I've got a slight headache," answered Muriel smiling and accepting another cup of tea.

"What happened last night?" asked Doris, who was longing to know. "You looked ever so bad, really."

"Oh, it's a very long and complicated story, and rather a horrible one," said Muriel sighing. "I'd rather not talk about it now. You see my nerves are still rather shaken and I shall have to discuss it later with the police, I am quite sure."

"The police. Coo' what 'ave you done?" cried Doris, her voice rising with her excitement. "Not killed anybody, or anything like that, have you?"

"No, of course not," replied Muriel. "It was what I saw, not what I did. I'll tell you about it later on, that is if they let me. Now I'll get up, and have a bath and some breakfast."

An hour later Muriel was lying back in a long cane chair on her verandah when a servant approached and said the commissioner of police was downstairs and would like to see her. She had been expecting this visit and knew she would have to face it sooner or later. When the commissioner strode along the

verandah, which shook under his heavy footsteps, she greeted him smilingly. He pulled up another chair, and sat down. He enquired after her health and then opened the proceedings.

"I would like to ask you some questions about the affair last night," he said gently.

"I thought you might," she replied at once. "I think the best thing would be if I gave you the main points of the story. I don't feel up to giving the whole thing just now."

"All right, tell me what you like and I can ask questions afterwards," he replied, crossing his legs and sitting back in his chair.

Muriel, having already considered what she was going to say, gave the bare facts, from the time Clive left Oxford until the night previously. The commissioner, visibly impressed, listened with absorbed attention.

"A very remarkable statement, Miss Burdon. Very remarkable," he exclaimed when she had finished. "You leave no possible doubt in my mind now that the man really is the Rajah of Bogra. But what I don't understand is why you should have thought that Mr. Penn was kidnapped. What gave you the clue?"

"Oh, that was easy. You see I knew Mr. Penn's secret. As far as I know only he and I shared it." She explained Clive's habit of becoming unduly aggressive after having taken more than his usual amount of drink. "Before he left England I warned him not to get into trouble by drinking too much."

"Yes, I see. A very sensible deduction, Miss Burdon." There was sincere admiration in the commissioner's voice. "If I may say so I think you're a remarkable young woman. I shall look forward to hearing the full story. In the meantime, in spite of your valiant efforts, you don't seem to have found this Mr. Penn."

"No, I haven't, but Shahmeeran said he was out of the rajah's hands. She was going to tell me what she knew, but she did not get the chance."

The commissioner nodded, uncrossed his legs, and leaning forward spoke earnestly.

"You no doubt understand that this affair is an extremely difficult and delicate one for me, involving as it does a ruling prince, as well as a woman like Shahmeeran." He cleared his throat. "This woman has a great deal of power and is feared not only in this city, but the north as a whole. She could cause a great deal of trouble."

Muriel nodded gravely and her visitor went on to ask many further questions.

"I hope you have not discussed this matter with anyone else?" he said at last picking up his topee. "Until it has been decided what action, if any, is to be taken, the less there is known about it the better. My hands are tied by the political side of the government, who may, of course, wish to suppress the affair."

"I haven't said anything about it," replied Muriel quickly.

"Good. And please don't until you hear from me again. In the meantime I assure you, Miss Burdon, we will do everything we can to locate Mr. Penn's whereabouts, but there again we must move tactfully because it concerns an Indian state which has its own police force."

The girl thanked him and they shook hands.

CHAPTER XIV

MURIEL had been gone from Lingam several days, but the Willises were not anxious when no letters arrived from her because it had been decided such things might be dangerous. One morning the resident went to the palace on one of his periodical visits to Diwan, and found the old gentleman in a great state of agitation, and the palace humming in a vaguely menacing manner.

He returned to the bungalow at noon and sought out his wife who was writing letters in the lounge. Glancing up from her bureau she saw from his face that something unusual had happened. Dropping her pen she hastily got to her feet.

"What is it, Peter?" she demanded.

"You'll never guess." He grinned at her boyishly.

"Mr. Penn has been found?"

"No."

Amy Willis frowned and shook her head.

"I can't guess. What's happened?"

"Bogra's vanished. Just gone off into thin air it seems."

"Good gracious! Has he? When did it happen?"

"The day before yesterday. He took his car out to the lake and was seen on his return, but instead of going into the city he went on and hasn't been heard of since."

"What an extraordinary thing. I suppose the palace is in a ferment?"

"I'd say it is. Buzzing like the old beehive. I suspect they're all pretending to be upset, when really they are rather glad. The Diwan made me smile. Tried his best to be properly concerned and yet couldn't keep a gleam out of his eye."

"What are they doing about it?"

"Very little because nobody seems to know what to do. The old man asked me for advice, and I said they should send out search parties, and that's what they're doing."

Mrs. Willis gave a little cry and her eyes became wide as an idea occurred to her.

"Do you think that woman in Delhi has got anything to do with it?" she suggested, lowering her voice.

"My sainted aunt! I never thought of that. Of course she might have. But what a daring thing to do," replied her husband, who also had an idea. "I tell you what, old thing, let's take the car out to the lake this evening. We may find out something."

Mrs. Willis agreed and that evening they took a long and roundabout track to the lake. Here they found the buildings and grounds deserted, except for a toothless ancient, who mumbled and leered at them. They returned home crestfallen. Mrs. Willis got out of the car on the drive, leaving her husband to put it away. She went slowly up the steps, crossed the verandah and passed into the lounge. Halting abruptly she gave a little gasp of surprise. At the far end of the room, near the dining-room door, was a strange figure, wearing only a dirty piece of rag as a rough loin cloth. Fascinated, she watched the man. She saw his deep mahogany-coloured skin, and long hair, bleached by the sun, hanging on to his shoulders. He had his back towards her as he shuffled a few steps at a time. He appeared to be aimlessly picking up and replacing anything that came near his hands. Mrs. Willis hastily retired and impatiently waited for her husband to return from the garage. When he came up the steps she put a finger to her lips.

"Peter, there's a strange creature in the lounge. I think he must be a wandering faquir, or something. Come quietly and look."

Treading softly they peered in at the open french windows and were in time to see the figure go into the dining-room. They went quietly after him. Side by side in the doorway they watched. The intruder's face was now in profile as he stood before the sideboard. They saw the face was painfully thin and hawk-like, with a scanty, ragged beard, and head bent well forward. The man fingered a candlestick and passed on to a silver biscuit box, which he opened after some fumbling. Closing it again he moved on, coming to a cigarette box. This was also opened and the man gave a grunt of satisfaction. He eagerly took out a cigarette and peered at it, but at that moment became aware he

was being watched. Slowly turning his head he stared with deeply sunken eyes at the Willis's.

"I have found a cigarette at last," he announced in a high, thin voice, and then chuckled inanely. "Thank God for a smoke."

"Good Lord, Amy! This must be Penn," cried Peter Willis starting forward.

"Yes, I'm Penn," answered the man chuckling again.

He held out the cigarette as if asking for a light, but his knees sagged and he pitched forward on to a rug and lay still. The cigarette rolled under the sideboard.

Mrs. Willis joined her husband, and they knelt beside the unconscious Clive, who was breathing unevenly. She burst into tears as she saw the starved body; the fingers with the nails worn away; and the pinched back, covered with old and partly healed weals.

"Come on, old thing, bear up," said her husband quickly. "No time for tears now. We must get him to bed."

Within a short time many things were taking place in the bungalow. The resident dashed off in the car to fetch a European doctor from the junction town, and his wife and the ayah prepared special foods, the administration of which proved a difficult and messy business. Amy Willis then tried to tidy him up. She roughly cut his hair, and took off as much of the beard as she could with the scissors. She was so pleased with the result that she even attempted to shave him with one of her husband's razors. When he later discovered the fact he was outraged, saying no woman could manipulate a razor properly, and that she had practically ruined it.

Clive lay oblivious to the activity going on about him. His claw-like hands rested on the white sheet, and his head was sunk deep in the soft pillows. When the doctor arrived he examined the patient and prescribed a special diet. He stated that with careful nursing he should show signs of definite improvement within a few days, but no attempt must be made to raise him from his torpor. He would slip out of it, and then he must not be excited.

"His heart is weak, Mrs. Willis," he said gravely. "That combined with his semi-starved condition is dangerous."

"Oh, he will get all right, won't he?" she exclaimed anxiously.

"I think the chances are fifty-fifty. I'll come again the day after tomorrow. There is nothing more we can do for the present. If he seems suddenly to get worse give him the contents of this in his forearm."

The doctor handed over a hypodermic syringe and then departed, leaving the Willises undecided whether to send for Muriel or not. Finally they agreed it would be better to wait and not face the girl with the patient in his present condition.

The next morning one of the palace cars arrived with a flourish and out of it stepped Paperta, veiled, but wearing a European dress. The surprised butler took her at once to his mistress. She smiled ravishingly as she introduced herself.

"I am Paperta," she announced, throwing aside the veil. "We knew in the palace last night that a strange sahib, very weak and ill had come here. I knew it must be Mr. Penn, for whom Miss Burdon was looking. I said to the ranee I must come here and help. She said yes when I said the sahib was Miss Burdon's friend. She likes Miss Burdon very much."

"It is very kind of you," replied Mrs. Willis gratefully. "I shall be very glad of your help. Someone has to be with him all the time, and except for the ayah, I don't trust the servants."

"Yes, I will help. Please take me to him. I want to see his face. I think Miss Burdon loves him."

"Oh, do you ?" answered Amy Willis, amused and surprised, as she led the way to the sick-room.

"Yes, if she did not love him why did she come out here to find him ?"

"They were great friends," expostulated the elder woman.

"Ah no. I am sure. Perhaps she does not know she loves him. Now he is found we shall see."

In the semi-dark room Clive lay motionless, and as Paperta stood by the bed looking down at him, her eyes clouded with tears.

"Bapri Bap, the poor, poor man," she exclaimed softly. "He is very sick. I think he is sick more of the soul than the body. I am very sorry." She glanced about to see if the ayah were still in the room. "Bogra is a devil. I hope she gives him all he deserves."

"Good gracious ! Do you think the same as we do ?" replied Mrs. Willis quickly.

"Yes, I am sure. I am her cousin and know what befell long ago. She hates him like—like the devil. She has taken him. I do not think he will return here."

"Oh !" Mrs. Willis was at a loss as to what to say.

"All the time he has been like this ?"

"Yes. He has hardly moved. The doctor says his heart is weak."

"But I will make him better," announced the little lady with complete confidence. "You English know much of medicine, but not all. We in India are better when it is the spirit that is sick. I will sit with him tonight. Tomorrow you will see."

Paperta at once became an active member of the household, delighting the Willises with her quick brain and charming manners. They were having tea in the lounge, with the ayah on duty in the sick-room, when she turned to Peter Willis.

"I am so happy now," she cried gaily over her tea cup. "I feel free again. How I want to be in England. If Bogra does not return then perhaps I shall go. I have plenty of money." She lifted her adorable little chin proudly, and then stiffened slightly. "Ah hi. What is that?"

Her acute hearing had caught the sound of an approaching car. In a few moments the Willises also heard it. Leaving the tea table they went out on to the verandah as a large touring car drew up with a screech of brakes. Out of it stepped Muriel, and behind came the driver carrying her bags. She smiled as she came up the steps and saw the general astonishment at her arrival.

"Hullo. Here I am," she announced, drawing off her gloves. "You all look very surprised."

"We are, my dear," replied Amy Willis embracing her She then held her at arm's length. "My goodness, what has happened? You're looking very tired and unwell. Come in and have some tea."

"Yes, I am feeling rather done-up." Muriel greeted her host and Paperta as they passed into the lounge. "I felt I couldn't stay another hour in Delhi," she continued as she sat down. "I had rather a shattering time, and I'm not sleeping as well as I should."

"Has she got Bogra?" enquired Paperta, leaning forward.

Muriel nodded and sighed.

"Yes, she has, or rather had, because he's now in hospital."

"So we were right, after all," said Peter Willis glancing round the group. "Tell us what happened."

Accepting a cup of tea Muriel gave an outline of what had occurred, and everyone listened with absorbed interest, which changed to horrified consternation on the part of the Willises.

"And so after all that I just had to come away," she ended up.

"I should think so," said Amy Willis feelingly. "It must have been dreadful. No wonder you're looking tired and can't

sleep. If it had happened to me I don't think I should ever sleep again without nightmares."

She was about to tell the girl of Clive's appearance, when she caught her husband's eye and he shook his head. Paperta saw the gesture and guessing the reason for it agreed. She declared that Muriel should go to bed at once, and Major Willis backed this suggestion. Protesting half-heartedly Muriel allowed herself to be persuaded, and as soon as she was settled in her room the normal routine of the household carried on much as usual.

"Why didn't you let me tell her about Mr. Penn ?" asked Mrs. Willis at dinner. "She asked me if we had had any news when I was helping her to bed. I found it most difficult to turn it aside without telling an awful lie."

"I thought if she saw him now it would worry her. If she can get a good night's rest, tomorrow it won't be so bad. I didn't like the look on his face when I saw him before tea. I know that look. I saw it several times in the war."

"What do you mean, Peter ?" enquired his wife sharply.

"It sometimes shows they are giving up the fight. Just slipping away, you know. At the best of times I don't think his constitution was very strong."

"Please do not be anxious, Mrs. Willis," implored Paperta eagerly. "I am sure I can help him tonight. Tomorrow that look will have gone, perhaps."

At ten minutes to eight the following morning Mrs. Willis tip-toed into the sick-room and was shocked. Paperta was leaning across the bed her face drawn and pinched, and her eyes heavy from lack of sleep. Her right hand was tightly clutched by both of Clive's as they rested on the sheet, but the darkening, utterly weary look had gone from his face, and he was sleeping and breathing like a tired boy.

"Oh, my dear," she said softly. "How long has he been holding your hand like that ?"

"Nearly all night," replied Paperta, looking up and forcing a smile to her lips. "He won't let me take it away. But see, he will now get well. It was good because he has drawn strength from me. I think he would have died this morning in the dawn."

Mrs. Willis nodded, and bending over, she gently but firmly, unclasped the hands. Clive turned restlessly on the pillow and muttered. He then opened his eyes and stared into the woman's face.

"Hullo, mother," he said, and fell asleep again.

Amy Willis summoned the ayah, and leading Paperta away plied her with tea and massaged her numbed hand and arm. Muriel appeared a few minutes afterwards, looking fresh and nearly normal, with only faint dark shadows under her eyes. She greeted them cheerfully and announced she had slept well. She then became aware of what her hostess was doing.

"What's the matter with your hand, Paperta?" she asked, and then frowned and looked puzzled. "There is something unusual going on," she continued, looking from one to the other. "I sensed it last night, only I was too tired to bother about asking. But I did wonder what you were doing here, Paperta."

The two women glanced at each other, smiled, and nodded.

"We have a big surprise for you, haven't we?" said Mrs. Willis, straightening herself and dropping Paperta's hand.

"Indeed we have," she replied. "Let us take her to him at once."

Muriel started and put a hand to her mouth.

"Clive," she gasped. "I know. He is here."

"Yes, but he has been very ill," said Mrs. Willis. "Today he is much better, thanks to Paperta, who stayed up all night with him."

They went to the sick-room and Muriel gave a little cry as she stood looking down at Clive. He heard her and stirred. His head turned towards her, his eyes opened, and he looked up and smiled.

"Why, if it isn't Mogs," he said distinctly. "Good old Mogs."

"Yes, it's me, Clive," she answered, blinking away some tears.

He then demanded to know where he was, and what Muriel was doing, but the three women instantly combined to assure him he must not ask questions, but lie quiet, after which he would be told everything.

He nodded, smiled again at Muriel and went off to sleep, much to everyone's relief.

In the afternoon, when Paperta had rested, the three women gathered in the lounge where they talked continuously, as questions and answers flew to and fro. Tea was brought in, and with it came Major Willis, sucking his pipe and grinning broadly. His wife glanced up and saw from his expression that something had happened.

"What is it, Peter?" she demanded. "Nothing serious, I hope?"

"No, not really, I've just been rung up by Ashe from Delhi. That's Sir James Ashe you know, our big political gun in the government," he explained to Muriel. "You've done the wrong thing, young woman. He isn't exactly pleased with you. I understood him to say he has ticked off the police in Delhi for not keeping you under their eye."

"Oh, what's the trouble?" asked Muriel calmly.

"They want the full story from you because it seems Bogra is in a pretty poor state in hospital. If you ask me I'd say they are all scared stiff of this Shahmeeran of yours and can't make up their minds what to do. I wouldn't mind betting if Bogra recovers they drop the matter and let him take it into the civil courts if he wants to."

"Is this woman really as influential as all that?" asked Amy Willis pouring out tea as her husband sat down.

"Good Lord, yes. Even I was aware of that. She knows things that could make the government highly embarrassed, besides stirring up heaps of trouble. You have only got to mention her name in the northern bazaars for fellows to look about furtively and lower their voices. She is almost as powerful as Durrani was in Peshawar and much wickeder." Peter Willis paused for a moment before continuing. "Sir James says you must go back to Delhi at once, Miss Burdon, and I'm to go with you."

Mrs. Willis turned to Muriel.

"Will you go?"

"Yes, I'll go. I don't mind what happens now that Clive is safe." She turned to her host. "When do we start?"

The resident considered this point and then grinned again.

"By rights we should take the mail train tonight, but tomorrow morning will do. It is more important for you to have another good night's rest, and if Sir James doesn't like it then he can do the other thing."

"Why do they want you, Peter?" asked his wife anxiously.

"Because I'm resident here, I suppose. I expect Ashe will have something to find fault with. He generally has."

"What kind of man is this Sir James?" asked the girl quickly, over her tea-cup.

"If you ask me I'd say he wasn't a man at all. He's just a cold, clear, devilishly clever brain. There is nothing human about him. He is as hard as jade and not half as nice."

"Shall I have to talk to him?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so, but you needn't worry. If you could

face Bogra, Ashe is child's play. But don't let him browbeat you, as he does with most people."

Muriel and Major Willis arrived in Delhi, tired and dusty in the late afternoon and went to the George Hotel, where he rang up New Delhi and informed them of their arrival. He went back to the lounge where Muriel was waiting and she looked up enquiringly.

"Sir James wants us to go out at nine o'clock this evening. I said we would. I hope you are not too tired and feel up to handling him."

"That's all right. I'll have some wine at dinner," she said smiling. "Not that I need it, but it may make my brain more active, as it did at Lingam."

They drove out to New Delhi in a large touring car through a hot, still night. Passing up Kingsway, they turned off and approached an imposing house with lights burning in most of the downstairs windows.

"Not feeling nervous, or anything?" enquired Peter Willis, as he helped the girl out of the car at the foot of the steps.

"Not in the least, thank you, but I'm very curious to see what he is like."

They were ushered into a great, specially cooled library, dimly lit, and with a spacious desk at the far end. They walked down the empty space between the desk and the door and Muriel saw a thin, grey-haired man leaning over some papers at the desk, as he sat facing them. As they drew near he took off his glasses, raised his head, and staring at the girl moved aside a brilliant desk lamp.

"Good evening, sir," said Major Willis. "This is Miss Burdon."

Sir James nodded and indicated two chairs placed near and on the right of his own. The visitors sat down and Muriel noted the cold blue eyes, and thin, compressed lips.

"So you are the young woman," said Sir James frigidly, as he took in her general appearance. "Why did you leave Delhi as you did? You have given us a lot of unnecessary trouble."

Muriel lifted her chin aggressively. She had expected abruptness, but not this studied rudeness.

"I was not aware I was under police surveillance," she answered sharply.

"Perhaps not, but you must have been fully aware that this matter was of grave importance."

"What took place at Shahmeeran's house does not actively concern me, Sir James. I merely happened to be there at the

time. I came to this country to find Mr. Penn, and with this woman's help I have done so."

"But as a direct result of your unconsidered actions a ruling prince has been tortured and died this evening. We regard this as a very serious matter."

"He's dead?" The girl glanced at Peter Willis, who made a slight grimace.

"He apparently contracted blood poisoning, Miss Burdon. Now perhaps you will give me the full story." Sir James leaned over and pressed a bell.

In the pause that followed Muriel caught her companion's eye fixed anxiously on her, and she nodded and smiled faintly. A side door opened and a European stenographer came in and sat down with open note-book and ready pencil.

The girl told her full story, clearly, but giving only the essential details. When she had finished, Sir James leaned over the desk and picking up a pencil toyed with it.

"I congratulate you, Miss Burdon on your clear brevity. You have given me what is required. I wish, however, to know one or two other details. What passed between the Rajah of Bogra and this young man at the club in Maddashah?"

"We don't know yet," answered Muriel. "He is too ill to question."

"I see. Now regarding the death of Rugbar Chand. What caused it?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, Sir James."

"Are you engaged to Penn?"

"No, I am not," replied the girl frowning. "And I don't see why you should consider it necessary to ask a question of that sort."

Sir James' lips quivered as he leaned over and pressed another bell. When a servant appeared he was ordered to bring in Bhai Chand. The highly nervous old gentleman trotted into the room and stood before the desk, where he was stared at for a long moment.

"You are Bhai Chand, the art dealer? You speak English?"

"Yes, sahib. I am Bhai Chand and I can speak English."

"I have read your statement to the police. Why did your son die in the house of this woman, Shahmeeran?"

The man hesitated for so long that he was ordered sharply to reply.

"When the soul is torn from its sheath in such a manner it does not always return securely, sahib. It was so with my son."

"Did you know this woman was to behave as she did with your son?"

"No sahib. I did not know."

"You were fully aware that the woman was going to torture the Rajah of Bogra. Why did you not try to prevent it?"

"Do men with naked hands tear a tigress from her prey?"

"I understand the woman gave reasons why she was to do this criminal act. What were they?"

Bhai Chand repeated what he could remember of Shahmeeran's indictment.

"Did you believe this to be true?"

"Why not, sahib? All India knew this prince to be an evil man."

"What is being said in the bazaars about the matter?"

"It is widely known, but men do not speak openly of her, or her actions. The sahib knows we have a proverb which says 'a loose tongue is a dagger in the throat.'"

Bhai Chand was then asked several more questions before being dismissed. When he and the stenographer had gone Sir James informed Muriel he would study her narrative and that she must remain in Delhi until a decision had been reached. He then turned abruptly to Major Willis.

"What is being said in Lingam about this affair, Willis?"

The resident stated what he knew, and gave as his opinion that the palace was generally relieved to be rid of the ruler.

"I did not ask for your opinions," snapped Sir James. "I want to know what the attitude of the people is."

"I don't know, sir."

"You are the resident in the state. You should know."

Major Willis flushed and faintly shrugged his shoulders. He knew it was unwise to protest or argue with this man. Before he could reply Muriel got to her feet with eyes sparkling angrily.

"You are being most unfair," she stated heatedly. "Major Willis only heard what happened from me just before we left Lingam, and so how could he know what the people in Lingam think? I don't suppose some of them even know Bogra is missing."

Sir James looked up sharply, and there was a glint in his cold eyes.

"I think you forget who you are talking to, young woman," he said icily.

"Oh no I don't, Sir James. I'm talking to the rudest and most offensive man I have ever met." She moved across to where her companion had also got to his feet. "Come along. We had better go before I say what I really think."

Peter Willis hesitated, but she took his arm and they began to move down the room when Sir James spoke.

"Before you leave the room, Miss Burdon, I must warn you not to visit this woman Shahmeeran again."

Muriel paused, stiffened, and replied over her shoulder.

"I shall do exactly as I wish. In fact I shall go and see her on the way back from here."

When they were in the car again Peter Willis stared at the girl and laughed ruefully.

"Did you mean that about going to see Shahmeeran?" he asked.

"Of course I did. We'll go there straight from here."

She leaned forward and asked the driver if he knew the house. The man started with surprise, and on replying that he did, was told to proceed there.

"But I can't go with you," expostulated her companion. "I must be careful, and not get in Sir James' bad books. My bread and butter depend on it."

"I don't see why you can't. He didn't tell you not to go, did he?"

"No. But still I don't think it would be wise."

"You are not afraid, are you?" she challenged.

"No, I'm not."

"All right then. To Shahmeeran and damn Sir James Ashe."

Peter Willis sighed and then laughed.

"What an infant terrible you are," he observed. "I bet you had no idea of going to see her until he mentioned it?"

"As a matter of fact I hadn't."

They were shown up to Shahmeeran's reception-room without delay, and she received them rising from a divan. Dressed in a pale green dress and a white sari, she looked exactly as Muriel had seen her when they first met. Smiling, she held out a hand which the girl took.

"I am indeed honoured above all that you should come to see me. I whom the government now name a female devil. Who is this sahib?"

Muriel introduced them and the woman gave him a long, searching look.

"Ah, ho, you are the resident in Lingam. I have long known your name, sahib. It was a poor reward to give one of your

abilities." She shrugged her shoulders. "It is ever so. Those who rise to high honour among your people and mine are they who hold back the pen and the tongue at the proper time. You, sahib, have done neither."

Peter Willis flushed and looked embarrassed at this knowledge of his past. The woman turned to Muriel and smiled.

"Come, sit and tell me why you have come. You know he is dead? A jackal's death for a jackal. The air is sweeter for his passing, as all Hindustan knows."

"Yes, we were told by Sir James Ashe this evening."

"Ho ho." Shahmeeran laughed gaily. "He summoned you to hear of my misdeeds? I know. They fear me in New Delhi as men fear the krait." She sighed. "He is a great man. It would indeed be better for this land if there were more of his stature. Were he and I man and wife we could rule Hindustan." She sighed again. "He sucked you dry of news as we suck a Kabuli grape?"

Muriel nodded.

"I came to thank you for your help. Without you I should probably never have found Mr. Penn."

"Ah ho. You *have* found him. Good. Very good. Tell me of this finding. None of these things is known to me, who consider more important matters at this time."

The girl told of Clive's dramatic return, of his illness, and Paperta's nursing.

"So Paperta lent her aid," cried the woman, much pleased at this news. "She is as a sister to me, and I love her. She has a sweet and merry spirit, but is as a caged bird. He has gone and perhaps the zenana will lose its fear, and merriment take its seat." Shahmeeran paused for a moment before continuing. "Is it known what passed between the sahib and Bogra?"

Muriel explained they had not yet been able to question Clive, and the woman nodded.

"It is in my mind it were wiser not to recall for him the shameful past. If he recalls it then ask the question. Is that not good council, sahib?"

Major Willis agreed that it was, and the woman, asking him many questions about his work, the conversation became general until she stirred and half-concealed a yawn.

"It grows late, and I no younger," she said leaning over and pressing a bell.

When the old servant appeared she gave an order and got to her feet. Her guests did the same.

"You, Miss Burdon, depart to your country and I remain to toy with the strings of men's destinies. You and I have plucked some cords which now hum half across Hindustan, disturbing even the mind of the government."

The servant returned carrying a small, red leather box which she held while her mistress unlocked it. Lifting the lid Shahmeeran searched inside and then held up a magnificent sapphire, which Muriel recognized as the jewel she had worn on her forehead on the fateful night. She held it out to the girl.

"Take this in remembrance of me. You have courage, and intellect, and have touched my heart. It was the gift of a king. My time draws near and it pleases me to consider that someone worthy should wear it. Ashes smouldering on the pyre have no use for such baubles."

Muriel, amazed by the gift, was about to refuse it, but her companion close behind, prodded her gently in the back and whispered she must take it. She did so and expressed her thanks.

"It is nothing," replied Shahmeeran, airily. "When you dangle it before the son on your knees, speak of me and his fat chuckling will perhaps reach me in hell. One thing remains. If my cousin, Paperta, so desires it, you will take her to England? In this land she will wilt and grow old before her time. It is little I ask, the gods know."

"Of course I will, and shall be delighted," replied Muriel sincerely. "I will suggest it to her when I go back to Lingam."

"Good. Very good." Shahmeeran turned to Peter Willis. "Farewell, sahib. We will pray the new prince shall be more fitting. If there be need of news, or I can lend my aid, send and I will consider the matter. You have my leave to go." She embraced Muriel quickly and turned to one of the windows as they left the room.

Two minutes later the couple went out into the hot, stale air of the street where the car was waiting.

They remained in Delhi and Peter Willis took the girl on sight-seeing tours to the Seven Dead Cities and into the history-drenched countryside. On the third day they were at luncheon in the hotel dining-room when a waiter approached and said Muriel was wanted on the telephone. When she returned to her seat her companion looked up and was surprised to see her showing much agitation.

"Do you know who that was?" she asked breathlessly as she sat down. "It was an A.D.C. from the Viceroy's House. He

said the Viceroy would like to see me, and would I go to tea this afternoon. What do you think of that?"

"My word, you are causing a flutter in high circles," he replied, grinning. "The Viceroy himself, eh? Well you can't go higher than that in this country."

"What shall I do?" cried the girl, thoroughly shaken. "I shall be so nervous. I shan't know what to say or do. I wish you were coming with me."

"What did you say?"

"I was so surprised I didn't say anything for a minute, and he had to ask if I had heard what he said. Then I replied I would be pleased to go."

Peter Willis laughed.

"My dear young woman, that was an order you know. A viceroy's request is an order in the same way as royalty, and you disobey at your social peril. Do you mean to say you are more nervous than when you went to beard Bogra in his lair?"

"Oh yes. Much, much more." She laughed uncertainly. "I'm all of a twitter as they say."

"You need not be. I understand he is a very human sort of person, not at all like Ashe.

"Oh dear, I can't eat a thing more," exclaimed the girl distractedly. "What shall I wear? I have only got this and my evening frock."

"That looks very nice and suitable," answered Peter Willis, highly amused. "I really shouldn't get fussed. Now if it had been the Vicereine it might have been different. He won't notice what you are wearing, I'm sure."

"What do I call him. Your excellency, or what?"

"Yes, that's right. Drop in an excellency now and again, but don't overdo it."

"Oh." Muriel gave a cry of distress. "I never asked the A.D.C. what time."

"If you arrive at about four-fifteen it should be all right." Her companion laughed again. "Come on. Eat something more. You must keep up the old strength, you know."

Muriel spent an agitated afternoon and was seen off by Peter Willis in the best hired car that could be found. It slid up the Kingsway, passed the small lodge house with the policeman on duty, and entered the fine grounds of the Viceroy's House. She took out a mirror from her bag, and glancing at her face was horrified. Nervousness and excitement had caused beads of perspiration to form on the end of her nose. A frantic application

of powder was hardly completed when the car drew up at a side entrance in the vast building and a gorgeously arrayed servant flung open the door.

Complete with handbag and gloves Muriel stepped out and was guided through what seemed to be hundreds of yards of corridors into a large drawing-room. Here she was welcomed by a slim young man so perfectly groomed that he was hardly human. They sat down on a chesterfield, which faced a grand piano on which stood a host of photographs in large silver frames, with a great bowl of flowers on one side. The A.D.C. leaned elegantly towards her.

"Her Excellency wishes me to say she regrets she cannot be here. She had a previous engagement."

"Oh, it's quite all right," replied the girl, struggling desperately to hide her nervousness.

Clutching the handbag so that a trembling hand should not be noticed, she felt unable to make conversation with the exquisite creature beside her, and hoped he would do it for her. The A.D.C. on his part was extremely curious to know why an unknown and good-looking young woman should be having tea in private with the Viceroy. Before he could make up his mind to ask a direct question a servant approached and nodded. The A.D.C. got to his feet.

"His Excellency will receive you. Please follow me."

He led the way through a door at the far end of the room and eventually into another, but smaller, drawing-room furnished in the intimate manner of those in the country at home. When she entered, a medium-sized man with a square, tanned and lined face, and greying hair got up from a chair facing french windows.

"Miss Burdon, Your Excellency," announced the A.D.C.

The Viceroy stared, screwed a rimless monocle more firmly into his left eye, strode forward and held out his hand.

"You really are Miss Burdon, aren't you? *The* Miss Burdon, I mean," he said quickly.

"Yes. I'm Miss Burdon, Your Excellency," she answered in a small voice.

"Remarkable. Quite remarkable," said the Viceroy smiling. "How do you do?"

They shook hands and he led the girl to a chair near his own, with a tea table set between. The A.D.C. would have given a good deal to have been allowed to remain, but he faded away as he was expected to do. They sat down and the Viceroy chuckled

and then laughed. It was a hearty laugh, and made Muriel smile and lose some of her nervousness.

"You know I expected to see someone quite different, Miss Burdon," he announced. "You're so young. Just a slip of a thing. Extraordinary. Won't you pour out the tea? My wife is unable to be here this afternoon."

Muriel put down her bag and gloves and turned to the table with its heavy silver and porcelain.

"I expect you are wondering why I asked you to tea?"

"Yes, I am," she replied, pouring out the tea.

"The reason is quite simple. I read what you said to Sir James Ashe and was deeply interested. Naturally I wanted to know what kind of person you were. I asked Sir James and his reply was not exactly satisfactory."

"What did he say about me?" enquired Muriel quickly.

"He said you were an extremely self-possessed young woman. He then smiled, a thing he does not often do, and suggested I might see you for myself."

"And what sort of person did you expect me to be, Your Excellency?"

"I'm not sure, but a young woman who has done what you have is unusual, to say the least of it. I think I expected someone much older and much less charming," said the Viceroy, his eyes twinkling. "I suppose you realize that in locating this Mr. Penn you have done what a police force could not do, and in addition caused more than a flutter to pass through several government departments?"

"Have I?" the girl smiled. "Sir James Ashe implied that he considered I was partly responsible for the Rajah of Bogra's misfortunes."

"You were in that you supplied this strange woman with an excellent excuse for wreaking her vengeance on the prince. You were not responsible for her actions, of course."

Muriel nodded and studied her companion as he turned to his tea cup. She liked his intelligent, grey-green eyes, and was sure he was a kindly, considerate person who, however, outwardly might have been an ordinary English country gentleman. He leaned across and offered a plate of sandwiches.

"Now tell me more about your stay in the palace at Lingam. Not what you told Sir James, but the more personal side of it. For example, did you expect to get information from this prince when he was making love to you? If so you did a braver thing than you probably realized."

Muriel began hesitatingly, but soon found herself talking as she might have done to Clive's father or Colonel Herbert. She told of her feelings towards Bogra; she described the zenana and its occupants; and finally she was led to give close details of Shahmeeran and her indictment of the dead rajah.

At half past five an A.D.C. tapped on the door and was told to come in. He did so and informed the Viceroy that he had an important engagement waiting.

"Go away, George," he ordered. "Tell the fellow to wait. I'm busy."

The young man vanished and the Viceroy offered Muriel a cigarette, which she refused. He lit one himself.

"Of course you have not yet learned what took place between the Rajah of Bogra and this young man in Maddashah? I should be interested to know what was said. You must write and tell me, Miss Burdon. By the way, are you and he—? I mean are you—?"

"Are we engaged?" Muriel smiled. "No we are not, Your Excellency. Everyone seems to think we should be. The Indians I met were frankly astonished when I told them."

"I can well believe that, Miss Burdon. Indians have gone a long way towards western civilization, but they still find our free and easy ways between the sexes difficult to understand."

They talked for a few minutes longer and then the Viceroy stubbed out his cigarette and got to his feet. Muriel knew it was time to leave and picked up her gloves and bag and stood up.

"Good-bye, Miss Burdon." They shook hands and the Viceroy's eyes twinkled again. "If I were you I should take this young man of yours home with you and see he stays there. India is no place for him and he would end up in further very bad trouble."

"That is just what I am going to do, Your Excellency."

THE END

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